

Baptism by Yang Jiang

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香港大學出版社

HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS

Hong Kong University Press
14/F Hing Wai Centre
7 Tin Wan Praya Road
Aberdeen
Hong Kong

© Hong Kong University Press 2007

Hardback ISBN 978-962-209-830-5

Paperback ISBN 978-962-209-831-2

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The first Chinese edition of *Xizao* was published by San Lian Shudian in 1988, and the second edition was published by Remin Wenxue Chubanshe in 2004.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Secure On-line Ordering

<http://www.hkupress.org>

Printed and bound by Kings Time Printing Press Ltd., Hong Kong, China.



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“At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square Word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed.”

— Britta Erickson, *The Art of Xu Bing*

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1

On the eve of Liberation,² Yu Nan was pretty well double-crossed. At least, Yu Nan felt Miss Hu double-crossed him. Onlookers might find it hard to say just who betrayed whom. They say even Solomon can't judge family quarrels, much less the murky relations between these two.

Yu Nan had a problem he couldn't talk about. His wife, Wanying, was just too virtuous; she gave him no pretext for divorcing her. And in fact, he wasn't really eager for a divorce. If he left Wanying, life would be much less convenient. It would be like a suckling leaving his wetnurse. But public morals aren't what they were: in this day and age, you can't have a wife and a concubine any more! And even if you could, would Miss Hu accept being a concubine? Even if Wanying were willing to take second place, Miss Hu still wouldn't tolerate her presence. If Miss Hu chose him as her husband, she would insist on sole possession.

Of course, Miss Hu wasn't exactly "Miss." Her former husbands had either divorced her or died, and anyway there were more than one. She knew very well that "Beauty is like a flower, but the years flow like water,"³ so she wanted to find a permanent husband and become a bona fide wife before it was too late. Given her circumstances, this was no easy matter. She had already reached the age where "Miss" no longer sounded like music to the ear. If she wanted the status of a wife, it was in order to enjoy all the things her own skills and credentials couldn't secure. Her conditions weren't stringent, but they were subtle. For example,

² The Communist victory in 1949.

³ Quotation from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) play *The Peony Pavilion*, by Tang Xianzu (1550–1616).

her husband had to be absolutely faithful and obedient; she must hold the reins. On the other hand, he couldn't be a fool; at the very least he must be presentable in society and have some qualifications. But neither could he be the sort of brilliant wit that invites admiration, and he shouldn't be too young or too handsome. Best would be someone other women wouldn't glance at twice. He should be like the maid a canny housekeeper hires, free of entanglements and free of worries. Miss Hu thought Yu Nan met each of her conditions perfectly.

Miss Hu's job was soliciting manuscripts for a general interest magazine subsidized by a powerful big shot called "The Boss." That was how she met Yu Nan. Yu Nan had studied abroad and was well-versed in Western and Chinese learning. He taught at a no-name university. He wasn't a star professor, but he could fool the students. He often produced essays and vignettes for the back pages of newspapers, and sometimes dabbled in modern verse. Miss Hu had asked him once or twice to write speeches for her "Boss." The "Boss" said Yu Nan was not devoid of talent. His background in the Classics was shallow, but his pen was facile. Speed was his strong point; if you wanted an article, he could produce one with a wave of his pen. Eventually he became editor-in-chief of the magazine the "Boss" subsidized. He didn't let opportunity pass him by. Armed with the title of editor, he cultivated some friendships, spread a bit of flattery, built up his status. He clung tightly to his position, kept a finger to the wind, knew how to worm his way in and how to push. In the last couple of years he had started to make a name for himself, and he seemed to have money saved up too. You couldn't call him handsome, but he was decently turned out, neither slovenly nor smelly. He wasn't tall and he was beginning to get plump. You could say he was of average build. To tell the truth, he wasn't the sort of man Miss Hu went for. On the other hand, he was gratifyingly infatuated and so naive. The one time he got passionate and didn't stop "where the proprieties demanded," as Confucius taught, he got a resounding slap in the face from Miss Hu. He went down on his knees and begged forgiveness, promising that in the future he would treat her as a goddess to be worshipped. Luckily, goddesses are allowed to have

fleshly desires, unlike chaste mortal women. Miss Hu generously allowed him intimacies, right up to the point where he could no longer control himself. Only then would she push him away, saying “No! Not until we’re legally married.”

Yu Nan was barely forty, only three or four years older than Miss Hu. He had married young and now had three children. Both sons had in turn passed the entrance examinations for a university in the western part of Peiping. Their thinking was progressive, and they drew a clear line of demarcation between themselves and their father except when it was time to ask him for money. His daughter was sixteen, attending a missionary high school in Shanghai, and already out in society. It would be easy to dispose of Wanying. Miss Hu had grown friendly with her and probed in every possible way. She was convinced Wanying would follow her husband’s orders like a lamb, and never make scenes or create obstacles. Yu Nan could shake off his family without qualms. But although Yu Nan kept saying he wanted to marry Miss Hu properly, he dragged his feet when it came to divorce. For her part, Miss Hu had him in the palm of her hand, and didn’t rush him. Since she had already secured one good prospect, there was no harm in looking around a bit longer. Luckily, Yu Nan had his own peculiarities. She wasn’t worried about other women stealing him away.

Yu Nan shrewdly avoided spending money on women. If Miss Hu mentioned that some restaurant offered a famous and delicious dish, he always said, “I’ll tell Wanying to make it for you.” Wanying had learned the secrets of good cooking from her mother-in-law. Yu Nan was an expert himself, a highly discriminating gourmet. As editor-in-chief of the magazine, he often invited guests home to dinner. This was a lot cheaper than treating at a restaurant, and more effective too. He didn’t have to pull out his wallet, and he could still submit an expense account to the magazine. But this way the guests became his own personal friends. It seemed that he himself had invited them, not the magazine seeking contributions. Not only that, but they ate food his wife had cooked with her own hands.

When Miss Hu was in a good mood, she wanted to go out with him to a movie or something of the sort. But without missing

a beat, he always replied, "I'd rather see you than a show." Of course, watching a drama he could only listen to the sweet talk in the dialogue, so much less gratifying than fondling Miss Hu and pouring out his heart. Nevertheless, sometimes when Miss Hu invited him to see a play or eat at a restaurant, he didn't say no. After all, he often revised manuscripts for Miss Hu, or wrote letters under her name. If Miss Hu treated him, that was a reasonable payoff.

Once Miss Hu invited him to a play, and when the curtain came down she felt hungry. On their way they passed an upscale Western restaurant, and she wanted to go in and eat supper. Yu Nan felt that this time it would be his turn to pay, so he demurred, saying he had eaten too many snacks and felt full. He just couldn't swallow another bite. Miss Hu said, "I just heard your stomach rumbling," and strode into the restaurant. Yu Nan could only follow, protesting that the sounds she heard were just sluggish digestion. He couldn't eat a thing. He would keep her company, but they should only order food for one person. Miss Hu could eat by herself. Miss Hu ordered the restaurant's best specialties, and once the food arrived urged Yu Nan to order some too. Yu Nan insisted he was just keeping her company, but looking at the exquisite settings he broke out in a sweat; the smell of the food made his mouth water. Luckily, before the bill could reach his hand, Miss Hu snatched it and paid. Miss Hu felt that he would squeeze every penny. He really was an "iron rooster that would never shed a feather," an absolute tightwad. She had heard that women often looked at him with contempt, and they certainly had their reasons. On the other hand, in a husband this was not necessarily a drawback. He was like some stingy housekeeper; he would never squander his money. But early on, she set a condition: she would control their finances. Yu Nan agreed at once. So far as he was concerned, controlling finances was management and nothing more. Ownership would still be in his hands. Even Miss Hu herself would belong to him, after all.

Circumstances create heroes; they also create marriages. The "Boss" said, "The Yangtze is a natural barrier. The Communists will never be able to cross it. As history shows, a standoff across the river will be the inevitable result." But his feet knew better. He

had already decided to adopt the best of the Thirty-six Strategies, running away.⁴ Before departing, he took care of Miss Hu; he found her future husband an executive position at UNESCO. Of course, this gift was intended for Miss Hu, but since she herself lacked qualifications, the prize went to her husband instead. When Yu Nan heard this news, he felt his worries were over. Never again would he have to wear himself out making contingency plans. He had thought about following a friend's relative to South America and going into business there, but that friend had wanted to go himself and couldn't provide for Yu Nan. Again, he had asked a friend in Hong Kong to arrange a teaching position for him at some university there. But this friend told him unceremoniously that his English was too strongly accented, and his Mandarin was non-standard. If you can't communicate, how can you teach? Better find some other plan. He had gone from pillar to post, but found no way out. And now, Miss Hu could take him to Paris! If he didn't get a divorce this time, when would he?

He told Miss Hu the family question was settled. He thought that under present circumstances, there would be no need to publicize the divorce, no need for lawyers, newspaper announcements, or court decisions on alimony. He had only to settle matters with Wanying, and then he would be free to go. Miss Hu prized realism; if time and money could be saved, that was all to the good. She only asked that they have a formal wedding before they left the country. Yu Nan said they could marry in a friend's living room, a so-called "salon wedding." Miss Hu had no objections to a "salon wedding," but she insisted that someone important should perform the ceremony. Afterwards they could go abroad for their honeymoon. She would find the "salon," as well as the celebrity. She made only one tiny request; she wasn't asking for a bride-price.

⁴ The Thirty-six strategies is a collection of proverbs dating from about the fifth century A.D. The first historical mention of this anonymous work is in the *Nan Qi Shi* (History of the Southern Qi Dynasty), which says, "Of the thirty-six stratagems of Master Tan, fleeing is the best." The current Chinese saying is almost identical: *san shi liu ji, zou wei shang ce*. Of the thirty-six strategies, fleeing is the best.

She wanted Yu Nan to provide a decent diamond engagement ring, and a pair of platinum wedding-rings. Yu Nan said that a small diamond was unpresentable, but a big one would be vulgar. Besides, foreigners no longer liked to flaunt precious jewels. They kept the genuine ones in their safe-deposit boxes, and wore the fakes. As for platinum rings, Yu Nan thought they were ugly, like tarnished silver, far inferior to eighteen karat imported gold.

Miss Hu didn't insist; she just wanted some sort of token. Yu Nan calmly pulled a pair of oval *tianhuang*⁵ seals from deep in a drawer. He dipped them in ink paste and stamped out a line, first in relief and then in intaglio: "Cherish the constancy of Mandarin ducks; never envy the immortals."⁶ He pointed, read it twice to Miss Hu, and wagged his head in satisfaction. "How about this?"

Miss Hu beamed and asked, "They're antiques too, right?"

Miss Hu had seen *tianhuang* with its translucent, warm luster. These two hunks of rock were just glossy and nothing more. Yu Nan was neither the scion of an old family nor a collector; his "antiques" were nothing but an old wedding present someone had given him and Wanying. Even if these pieces of *tianhuang* were more precious than gold, the two tiny bits of rock amounted to offering the Buddha borrowed flowers. There was no way they could satisfy the feelings of a goddess like Miss Hu. She admired them fulsomely, returned them to Yu Nan and urged him solemnly to guard them well. Then, shelving her smile, she said she still had a lot of matters to arrange and asked Yu Nan to wait a while. She quickly took her leave, but turned on the threshold and said, with a smile, "Oh, yes, I already have the rings!"

They were through.

Miss Hu was very particular when it came to choosing a husband, but she had counted on having everything her way. No, that wasn't it, she had been too much of a realist; she hadn't held out for her heart's desire. All she wanted was to find a "safe

⁵ *Tianhuang*: Yellow larderite, a rare stone used for seals.

⁶ From a Tang Dynasty poem by Lu Zhaolin. Mandarin ducks, which mate once for life, are symbols of marital fidelity.

husband,” one other woman wouldn’t fancy. She forgot that she was a woman too. Seeing Yu Nan’s stinginess, she couldn’t stop fuming. She thought, “So cheap! Is that all I’m worth, two pieces of stone? I compromised again and again, and I still ended up as marked-down goods.” That foreign executive post was her trump card. “Yu Nan, do you think you’re the only one who can fill it?”

She had a candidate to hand, the man she really loved. But his wife was a notorious shrew with the principles of the dog in the manger. Her slogan was, “I won’t let you have it easy; I’m never going to divorce him.” Miss Hu’s only choice was to retreat and take second-best. So she had settled for Yu Nan. She had Yu Nan to thank for enlightening her about divorce through desertion and wedding salon-style. If the man she really wanted seized his chance and emigrated, his wife wouldn’t be able to hunt him down no matter how ferocious she was. Either way, it wouldn’t be a legal divorce or a legal marriage. Why should I be so hard on myself and let you, Yu Nan, have things easy? When she stopped smiling and told Yu Nan to wait, there was a hint of threat. He had led her on for two years; if she made him wait a few days, it wouldn’t exactly be a crime. In fact, when she said those parting words, she was really sneering at him. She just couldn’t be sure yet that the man she wanted had the guts to elope and leave the country with her. So for the time being she still covered her face with smiles.

Yu Nan knew nothing of this. He thought Miss Hu was just as infatuated as he was. Otherwise, why insist on marrying him?

“Like an idiot waiting for a wife,” Yu Nan waited idiotically for news of her. He didn’t have to wait too long. Not ten days later, he received a letter from Miss Hu saying that she had followed his suggestion, arranged a “salon wedding,” and was formally married. By the time he received the letter, bride and groom would have already flown to Paris for their honeymoon. Alas, time pressed them cruelly and she must forego the pleasure of bidding farewell in person. Still she wished to extend her heartfelt wish that Mr. and Mrs. Yu Nan would taste the joys of growing old together, and that he would never relinquish his desire to “cherish the constancy of Mandarin ducks and never envy the immortals.”

1

The offices of the Foreign Languages Department were at some distance from the other departments. Shanbao, Luo Hou, Jiang Min, and Yao Mi shared the outer office. The inner office contained the department head's large desk along with other desks, large, small, old, and new ones, and a big empty bookcase. But those few research workers with loftier titles, or lofty ideas of themselves, seldom showed up. They all worked at home, except for Yancheng who came often. Fu Jin had his own office and never came to the Foreign Languages Department. When Jiang Min wasn't around, Yao Mi asked Shanbao and Luo Hou to move Nina Shi's new desk back to its old spot. They found her another one in pretty good shape, and at her request put it in a corner near the entrance door.

Today was the first department meeting for the Foreign Languages Department, and the stoves in both offices were roaring. Except for Jiang Min, the four from the outer office had already arrived. After his breakfast, Yancheng was in a hurry to get to the meeting early, but just as they were leaving Lilin remembered that Zhu Qianli's smelly pipe would surely make her reek from head to foot. She changed to an old coat and sweater and put on an undervest too, expecting the room to be cold. Yancheng waited as she changed, silently remembering his pact with Yao Mi, "We have to use some strategy." Strategy? What kind of strategy? The idea was to try their best to end up in the same group, without anyone noticing. It dawned on him that he would have to be vigilant, careful, and furtive.

The couple still reached the office before some of the others. Luo Hou and Shanbao greeted them and said, "You haven't been here for a while, Professor Xu. Did you know we have a new colleague?"

Yancheng saw Yao Mi in the corner when he entered the room. Very strategically, he turned and only nodded slightly to her. He quickly explained that they had some additions to their household, and they'd had their hands full with the resulting chaos. Lilin went over and welcomed Yao Mi, asking why she was sitting in the corner. Jiang Min happened to come in just then, and interjected, "Yao Mi likes to hide in the corner." Yao Mi just said with a smile, "I'm comfortable here. I can take naps."

They all moved to the inner room, and each of them found a seat. Shanbao carried in two extra chairs and Yao Mi brought her own chair. Lilin noticed that Yancheng and Yao Mi were cool to each other. Yancheng didn't speak to her and paid her no attention; it seemed he had no interest in her. Lilin felt that she must have been paranoid. She was glad she hadn't confronted him.

As soon as Yu Nan entered the room, he greeted Yancheng and Lilin warmly. He only glanced at the rest of the group. He sat next to the department head's large desk. Zhu Qianli came in and saw Yao Mi. With a smile, he said, "Oh, I heard that Miss Yao had joined our department! Is this a meeting to welcome her?" He saw that there was an empty seat next to Lilin, and hurried to sit down. Yao Mi frowned and said nothing. Zhu Qianli didn't feel rebuffed at all. He went on, "Have you been here long?"

Yao Mi managed to say, "Four, five, six days."

Yu Nan raised his thumb. "Covers the territory!"

As he was speaking, Nina and Taotao waltzed in together. Nina had come to the office before, and had taken possession of the new desk. Yancheng knew nothing about this. When he saw the two enter, he moved to block them, saying loudly, "We're having a meeting!"

Lilin who was sitting beside him quickly gave him a light nudge.

But Yancheng ignored her. He saw them come in and sit side by side at the big desk reserved for the department head. He said in surprise, "Are you also in this department?"

Lilin quickly said, "Of course! It's the Foreign Languages Department, after all!"

Pipe in mouth, Zhu Qianli chortled, "Loyalty to our own camp,

please! The Soviets aren't foreigners! Russian isn't a foreign language!"²⁶

Yancheng was embarrassed. He said, "I thought the Soviet Department was separate from ours."

Nina's big red mouth grinned. There were rose-colored lipstick stains on her yellow teeth. She cocked her head and laughed charmingly, then said in a softened voice, "How can you separate them!" She glanced at her watch, then looked around. Everyone had arrived. Rapping her pen on the desk, she said, "We'll begin the meeting."

Yancheng stared. Lilin nudged him again.

Nina went on, "Comrade Fu Jin was busy today and couldn't come. He asked me to chair this meeting as his representative. I'm going to pass on some instructions from the directors." She pulled out a cigarette and offered one to Yu Nan. Striking a match, she lit Yu Nan's cigarette and then her own. She inhaled deeply and holding the cigarette in two fingers blew out a thick puff of smoke.

Zhu Qianli took his pipe out of his mouth and stood up. He was very thin and short, and felt he looked insignificant sitting down, so he tended to stand. "Excuse me, I have a question. This is the first time I've come to a meeting here, and many things are still new to me. I only know that Comrade Fu Jin is the head of this department, along with his other duties. Otherwise, I don't know who's who. Is Comrade Nina Shi the assistant head?"

Nina's smile grew even more charming. She said, "Professor Zhu, please be seated. Comrade Yao Mi, you don't need to take minutes."

Yao Mi just said quietly, "This is my own notebook."

Luo Hou's two thick eyebrows changed from "ten past ten" to "seven past ten." Opening his eyes wide, he asked, "We're not allowed to write down the directors' instructions?"

²⁶ Chairman Mao had urged the country to "side totally with the Soviet Union." Zhu is being sarcastic.

Nina said, “Oh, I just meant that the department minutes are the responsibility of the department secretary. The reason I’m passing on the instructions is for the comrades to discuss them.”

Shanbao was the department secretary. Raising his notebook, he asked, “Should I take minutes or not?”

Nina said, “Right now I’m just answering Professor Zhu’s question. No need to write it down. Professor Zhu, the director of the Institute is Comrade Ma Renzhi. Surely, you know that? Comrade Fu Jin is the deputy director and also head of the Foreign Languages Department. The Modern Literature Department and the Theory Department each have one head, no assistant head. The Classics Department doesn’t yet have a full complement of personnel. A few workers are continuing to punctuate and annotate classical texts. This is purely technical work, and it can’t be called research. Formerly Comrade Wang Zheng supervised this work, but now she has been promoted and is no longer with the Institute. When the Classics Department meets, if Comrade Ma Renzhi can’t come, Professor Ding Baogui is the convener. As for my role today, you can consider me a provisional convener.” She stopped for a minute, as the whole department listened in silence.

She went on in a serious tone, “This department of ours is rather complicated. The other departments have already been at work for a while. Ours is the only one that still hasn’t completed its work proposals. Everyone has submitted individual work proposals, but the work plan of the entire department has not been pulled together.”

She flicked the ash from her cigarette, inhaled, and said feelingly, “Individual expertise can be used to serve the people. But the point is to serve the people, not to show off your expertise! For example, one work plan proposed to study some work of Mallarmé’s called *Flowers of Evil*.²⁷ Of course, Mallarmé is a great writer and he’s known all over the world. But *Flowers of Evil*! Surely that kind of novel must be corrupt? How could it serve the people!

²⁷ The reference is to a collection of poetry by Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, or *Flowers of Evil*.

“I’m not pointing a finger at any particular individual. And I won’t bring up all the examples. But most of us in this department are doing research on the literature of capitalist countries. We must discriminate rigorously between the essence, which we can absorb, and the dross, which we must criticize. We cannot just accept everything, warts and all. In a word, research on bourgeois literature requires the correct attitude, guided by political principles. You study this author, he studies that author, it’s all disconnected, you can’t bring it together, you can’t reach any conclusion. We must learn from the advanced experience of our older brother, the Soviet Union. We must choose a few priorities according to the Soviet history of world literature, combine our strengths, and then we can work together diligently and reap the fruits of our labor. Now I have passed on to you the views of our leaders, for everyone to consider and discuss.”

Zhu Qianli’s work proposal was to study Mallarmé’s Symbolist poetry and Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Cupping his pipe, he snorted, and muttered, “Mallarmé! *Flowers of Evil!* A novel! A novel!”

But no one paid him any attention. Everyone heard Nina out with reverence. Then they sat dumbly, watching her smoke.

Yu Nan asked, “Did the leaders mention what our priorities should be?”

Taotao said in an affected, soft voice, “Shakespeare, Balzac, Dickens, the eldest Brontë sister.”

Yancheng waited a second, then asked, “Is that all?”

Taotao said, “Our numbers are limited. We have to be realistic!”

Yancheng didn’t stutter at all this time. He pressed on. “And Soviet literature?”

Nina slowly stubbed out her cigarette, and slowly said, “Don’t worry, Professor Xu. Soviet literature will have its own department, but we haven’t enough staff yet. It won’t be established for a while. Like the Classics Department, it’s still in the planning stage.”

Taotao offered a poetic footnote. “At present, Soviet literature suffuses every research priority.”

Zhu Qianli asked in astonishment, “What do you mean, ‘suffuses’?”

Taotao said, "For example, what constitutes the underlying nature of a literary period? Where do you draw the line between the ascent of capitalism and its decline? We can't let everyone decide such questions individually. We must have a unified, correct, viewpoint."

Yancheng said, "Ah." His tone clearly indicated his skepticism. Lilin nudged him again. He didn't acquiesce, but turned his body and twisted his head to look at her, as if asking, "What was that for?" Embarrassed, Lilin lowered her eyes and didn't dare utter a sound.

But Zhu Qianli went on, "In other words, we must all follow the viewpoint of the Soviet Union. The Soviet viewpoint drives every single research topic."

Yu Nan corrected him, "Not so much 'drives,' as 'offers us a model.' I think that's what principled guidance means, and it will be very beneficial. As Comrade Taotao has explained, we will choose four priorities for research ..."

Nina said, "Right! Choose four priorities, and divide into four groups."

Yu Nan rushed to put in, "I think ... I ... will do research on Shakespeare. Comrade Chen Shanbao can be my assistant, how would that be?"

Jiang Min had never dreamed that Professor Yu would choose Shanbao and not her. She considered the situation, and put out a feeler, "I could work with Professor Du on Brontë. Do you want me, Professor Du?"

Very quickly and smoothly, Lilin responded, "Excellent! We'll work together."

Yancheng was secretly pleased. Calmly, he said, "Then I'll work on Dickens."

Luo Hou said happily, "I'll work on Dickens too."

Yao Mi said hastily, "I'm Dickens, too."

Zhu Qianli looked at Yao Mi and said teasingly, "If you're Dickens, then I'm Balzac." He hoped to get a laugh, but no one was in the mood.

Nina said, "Comrade Yao Mi, you know French, so you can be Professor Zhu's assistant. So it's set. We have four groups, and

each group has a leader and an assistant. In future leadership discussions, only the group leaders will need to attend.”

Yao Mi was upset. “French wasn’t my major. I only just started studying it.”

Zhu Qianli said, “I’ll teach you.”

Nina said, “The specialists will use their expertise, and the assistants will learn from them. It will be an apprentice system. The masters will direct the research, and the apprentices will increase their professional knowledge as they work.”

Luo Hou said, “I know some French too, I could be Professor Zhu’s apprentice.”

But Zhu Qianli said, “Fiction isn’t my specialty. My research is in poetry and drama.”

Nina paraded her learning. “Perhaps Professor Zhu could work on Balzac’s *Human Comedy!*”

Zhu Qianli replied emphatically, “I already told you, my specialty isn’t fiction! I know English too and I’ve done research on Shakespeare. I’ll join Comrade Yu Nan’s group and be his assistant.”

Taotao murmured, “This is troublemaking.”

Nina asked, “But what about Balzac? We can’t leave out Balzac!”

Yancheng couldn’t resist. “We’re leaving out quite a lot! Forget about Russian literature, German literature, Italian literature. Speaking only of French and English literature, what about Hugo? Stendhal? Flaubert? Molière? Byron? Shelley? Fielding? Thackeray? Instead, we have Brontë!”

Shanbao held back for a while, then said timidly, “I’m not very qualified. Shakespeare is too advanced for me. I ... I ...”

Jiang Min quickly said, “I’ll change places with you.”

Lilin said with a smile, “Let’s just eliminate our group. I’ll learn from Professor Yu too.”

Yu Nan said, “I’m not a Shakespearean! I’ll learn from Professors Zhu and Du.”

Nina hastily rapped on the table with her pen. “Comrades, don’t be negative! I’m asking everyone for constructive suggestions!”

Zhu Qianli said, “Good! I’ll be constructive! My wife — my partner²⁸ and I lived together in France for ten years. Let’s ask her to head a group, and I’ll learn from her!”

“Who might your partner be?” Nina opened wide those petulant eyes of hers.

“She’s just a housewife, not a big name.”

Taotao was indignant. “That’s an insult to women!”

Luo Hou seized the opportunity to interrupt. “It’s time for lunch. I suggest we adjourn and meet again in the afternoon.”

Nina looked at her watch. It was indeed past noon. She took two deep drags of the cigarette she had just lit. Rising gracefully, she said, “Today’s meeting was very productive. All the comrades spoke their minds and expressed their opinions. I shall report all of it to the leaders. Now the meeting is adjourned.”

“Are we meeting again in the afternoon?” Many people wanted to know.

“I’m sorry, I don’t make the decisions,” she protested in mock anger, then laughed coyly. With one hand holding her cigarette and the other draped around Taotao, she let those closest to the door leave first.

²⁸ Zhu Qianli has switched from using an old-fashioned term for wife (*nüren*, or woman) to the gender-neutral term used by the Communists, *airen*, or lover.

1

Baffled, Zhu Qianli asked Luo Hou, “I hear there’s some sort of Three Anti Campaign going on outside. I know about anti-profiteering, but what else??”

“Three Anti means three antis,” Luo Hou said.

“Anti what?”

“First, anti-bureaucratism. Second, anti-corruption. Third, anti-waste.”

Zhu Qianli puffed on his smelly pipe and said comfortably, “Well, that has nothing to do with me. I’m not a bureaucrat, so how could I suffer from bureaucratism? I just draw a monthly salary and otherwise I never touch a penny of public money, so how could I be corrupt? As for waste, I can’t even waste my own salary! All I get is five yuan a month for pocket money. I can’t even afford cigarettes, just a few cheap leaves to fill my pipe. How could I economize any more?”

On this basis, Zhu Qianli calmly distanced himself from the whole matter.

The masses had already begun to organize. And after many study sessions, they were mobilized.

Zhu Qianli complained that the new department head’s regulations were too strict. Luo Hou never had time to come to his house. Without that help, he couldn’t manage to send off the private earnings from his writing, and his wife found the money orders along with a letter to his family. She had always suspected he had a wife and children in the country and tried to keep him from sending them support money. Now she finally had proof. She was so angry that she hit him and scratched his face, leaving four bloody tracks. Zhu Qianli couldn’t face the world. Claiming illness, he stayed home and didn’t go out.

Gradually he learned from the tidbits his wife passed along that all of their neighbors were attending meetings day and night. It seemed the Three Anti Campaign had reached the Institute. His wife said he had twice been asked to attend meetings, but she told them he was ill. Zhu Qianli was a bit worried. Now he had received a notice that there was an urgent large meeting which he must not fail to attend. When he got this notice he suddenly felt afraid. He thought he'd better do a little research in advance.

Although the scabs had already fallen off his face, some faint red marks were still visible. All he could do was pretend he had a cold, so he wrapped a scarf around the lower half of his face and went to find Luo Hou. But there was no one in the office. According to the janitor, they were all at study sessions. If they were studying, why were they all hiding somewhere, without a trace? He felt something was fishy.

He was on fairly friendly terms with Ding Baogui, and thought of asking him. But perhaps he was also hiding out somewhere to study. He rushed to the Ding house, and found Yu Nan there too.

Zhu Qianli asked, "All the young people are studying. Studying what? The Three Antis? Are we old folks studying too?"

Lowering his voice, Ding Baogui said in surprise, "You didn't go hear our comrade leaders give a demonstration of self-criticism?"

Zhu Qianli said he'd been ill.

Yu Nan said, "Didn't they come seek you out? Professor Zhu, you've distanced yourself from the masses too much."

Zhu Qianli said disconsolately, "My wife said someone came to inform me, but since I had a fever, she didn't tell me."

Yu Nan said rather scornfully, "The mobilization speech is tomorrow. You didn't know that either?" Yu Nan and Zhu Qianli despised each other and seldom exchanged words. This time Zhu Qianli could only confess that he knew there was an urgent meeting, but he didn't know exactly what kind of meeting.

Ding Baogui said, "My old friend, the Three Antis have arrived at your doorstep. And you're still dreaming!"

"At my doorstep? What could they have against me?" Zhu Qianli couldn't make head or tail of it, but seeing how frightened

and uneasy they were, he couldn't help feeling a bit frightened himself.

According to Ding Baogui and Yu Nan, the Campaign in the Institute was getting started rather late. However, Fu Jin and Fan Ertan had already done self-criticisms for demonstration purposes. Fu Jin accused himself of having entered the Party for impure motives. Because he had courted a bourgeois woman without success, he had wanted to prove himself and rise above others, to enter the Party and become an official. The masses felt his self-criticism was very good; he had dug deeply, dug right down to the roots. Fan Ertan criticized himself for resting on his revolutionary credentials, distancing himself from the masses after Liberation, forgetting where he came from, and so forth. The masses were very satisfied with both directors' self-criticisms. The head of the Theory Department criticized himself for being arrogant, for lacking respect for the masses, for seeking fame and profit, for single-minded ambition. The head of the Modern and Contemporary Literature Department criticized himself for being lazy, hating work, and seeking only pleasure. The masses had some complaints about them. The first didn't dig deeply enough, and the second lacked sincerity.

The Classics Department and the Foreign Languages Department lagged behind the others and hadn't mobilized yet. Since Ding Baogui was only a small group leader (the young department secretary had been put in charge of study sessions in the Classics Department), he hadn't realized that he would have to make a self-criticism. Wang Bo held two jobs, and from the start of the Campaign he threw himself entirely into the movement at his university. Yu Nan was new at the job as Foreign Languages Department head, and Fan Ertan had not asked him to make a self-criticism. In the Library and Resource Center too the Campaign had not yet begun. Nina and Taotao were in the country participating in land reform, and it would be a while before they returned. It was rumored that the Campaign would go deeper, and that the next phase would follow the model set by the universities. That was why a large mobilization meeting had been called.

Ding Baogui grumbled, "I haven't courted any bourgeois women. How can I follow that model of self-criticism? I've also

never been arrogant, never sought fame or profit, never wanted an official post ...” Yu Nan cut him short. “So you’re an absolute paragon! That whole act is fake. You pretend you’re above politics, only trying to scrape a living.”

Ding Baogui sighed. “I’m afraid I have no talent for excoriating myself until I’m wallowing in the gutter. It looks to me as if those two model self-criticisms were tested up and down in some kind of ‘core’ leadership session, and that’s how they passed. But look at the heads of the Theory and Modern Literature Departments. They kept heaping abuse on themselves, and the masses still said, ‘Not sincere! Not nearly enough!’”

Yu Nan was there because he wanted to find out about the “university model.” Ding Baogui had former colleagues teaching at universities, so he would know the details. But Ding Baogui said only, “It sounds ugly! They call it, ‘Pull down your pants, cut off your tails!’ Even the women professors have to pull down their pants!?”

Zhu Qianli was amused. “With fox spirits,⁴² you can pull down their pants but you still can’t see their tails. You have to get them drunk before they appear in their original shape.”

Ding Baogui said, “So! You seem to have met some fox spirits!”

Yu Nan didn’t want to sit there and listen to their banter. It was no use talking to these two airheads. Better to question Xu Yancheng and his wife. Even if Yancheng was standoffish, Lilin was quite approachable. The last time he invited them to dinner, Lilin didn’t wait long before asking them back. He took leave of the Ding family and hurried to the Xu household.

Lilin was home. These days the young people had meetings every day and no one came to work at the office. Yu Nan had stopped going to work too. Lilin no longer went to the office in the afternoons. She and Yancheng had temporarily put aside their estrangement and together tried to fathom the situation and compare notes.

⁴² Fox spirits: Creatures from Chinese folklore who assume the shape of beautiful women.

Yu Nan arrived. Lilin very solicitously invited him to sit down, offered tea, asked courteously about his health. Yu Nan inquired about Yancheng. Lilin answered vaguely that he had gone out to borrow some books. Yu Nan suspected Lilin was hiding something. But when he asked about the Three Anti Campaign at the university, she answered straightforwardly. It was called “taking a bath.” Everyone had to take this bath, and “pass the test, one by one.” But exactly what kind of bathing this was, she couldn’t say. All she knew was that those of high rank, such as university presidents, institute directors and so forth, bathed in a “big tub,” and the lower ranks bathed in a “small tub.” Those in between had a “medium tub.” A meeting of the whole institution was the biggest of “big tubs.” A lot of people meant a lot of water and a big tub. Ordinary professors only needed to bathe in a “small tub,” in their own departments. She didn’t seem terribly worried.

Yu Nan left with effusive thanks, and suggested that if any of them heard something new about the situation, they should keep each other informed. Lilin agreed without hesitation.

Yancheng was, as usual, at the Yao house. But this was the last time he would listen to music with Mrs. Yao.

She said, “Yancheng, there’s a Campaign going on now. You’d better be careful. Don’t go visiting other people, they’ll say you’re feeling people out. Or that you’re conspiring with them to form alliances.”

He thought this was probably a warning Yao Mi had provided for his benefit. Guiltily he asked, “Do people know I come here?”

“They’ll know sooner or later.”

“So I have to wait until the Campaign is over before I come to see you again, is that it?”

Mrs. Yao nodded.

Yancheng was a little put out. He sat for a while, then got up and said, “Mrs. Yao, take good care of yourself.”

Mrs. Yao said, “And you, study well.”

Morosely, he said goodbye and went home in silence. He didn’t dare tell Lilin what Mrs. Yao had said. But when Lilin told him how Yu Nan had asked that they keep each other informed, he

quickly said, "Pay no attention to him. We can't conspire privately with him."

Lilin said, "We're not thieves or criminals."

Yancheng said, "Let's wait for instructions. Tomorrow at the mobilization meeting the directors will tell us just what it is we have to do." Lilin watched him go disconsolately into his den, and thought he was like a whipped dog with its tail between its legs.

Epilogue

One Sunday morning, Yancheng said to Lilin, "I'm going to the Yaos'. Does that bother you? Do you want to come with me?"

Lilin wasn't dressed yet. She had already slipped back a little, into her old ways. Her complexion didn't look so sallow and she no longer wore uniforms. She gave an unconvincing smile. "It's been a long time since we went to their house. Should I go too? Wait till I change my clothes."

Lilin dressed quickly while Yancheng waited in silence. Suddenly he heard a guest arrive, and seized his chance to slip out the back door alone.

Mrs. Yao was at home. Yancheng inquired about her health and asked casually, "Is Yao Mi at work?"

Mrs. Yao laughed, "You've gotten addled by all those meetings. It's Sunday, why would she go to work? She went out with Luo Hou."

Yancheng quickly turned away. He felt his heart lurch for a few beats and he knew his face muscles would also react. For a moment he seemed to hear Yu Nan's words, "Love demands complete possession," and he was so embarrassed and ashamed that he broke into a cold sweat.

Mrs. Yao didn't seem to notice. She said, "Yancheng, I haven't congratulated you yet, because I don't know whether you're happy about it or not. I hear that you two won first prize in the lottery. Are you glad?"

Yancheng said he didn't know about winning any prize.

"You were both posted to the university. The news came yesterday. You didn't know about it yourselves?"

"How about everyone else?"

“Zhu Qianli is going to some foreign language institute, and Jiang Min too. No one else has been assigned yet. But you two are assigned. It’s definite.”

Yancheng was silent for a moment, then said hesitantly, “On the form, I said my goal was to teach English grammar, and Lilin said she wanted to teach spoken English. I don’t know whether that will be up to us.”

“Why do you want to teach grammar?”

Yancheng gave an embarrassed laugh. “Mrs. Yao, I used to be very arrogant. Some people said science would save the country, but I maintained that literature would save the country. And not only the country, I thought the subtle influence of literature would save the people too. But forget about my arrogance. Now I realize that I’m totally unfit to teach literature. If I talked about the subtle influence of art, I would be divorcing myself from politics and advocating art for art’s sake. From now on, the less I have to do with literature, the better. My plan is to teach English to students from other departments, or else just grammar for English majors. But if the choice isn’t mine to make, then I’ll fare even worse than here in the Research Institute.”

“Ah Mi said she wanted to do library work, or possibly translation,” Mrs. Yao said. “Luo Hou’s aunt and uncle paid a special visit to tell me they wanted Ah Mi and Luo Hou to put down the same choice, so that they would be assigned to work in the same place. But I don’t know what Luo Hou put down.”

Yancheng hastened to say, “Luo Hou is very capable. He’ll accomplish a great deal. He has courage, insight, and generosity. I really like him.”

Mrs. Yao said, “He’s wild and undisciplined, but he knows his own mind. He worships you! He’s never wanted anyone to propose a match for him. He says he wants to marry a tough woman who can stand up to him when they fight. Recently, after his aunt and uncle came to visit, I asked if he’d found his tough woman yet. He said he hadn’t, but he planned to ask Professor Xu to find him a girlfriend.”

Without thinking, Yancheng said, “What does he need me for! He already has one, doesn’t he?”

“You mean Ah Mi?” Mrs. Yao smiled. “I asked her. She said she’s never getting married. She plans to stay with her mama all her life.”

“She said that before, but does she still say it?”

“She said it before, and she still says it.”

When Yancheng heard this, it was as if a sweet rain fell on the long drought in his heart. He immediately felt relieved, but at the same time he felt a faint pang. He said, “She could marry and still stay with her mama.”

Mrs. Yao said, “In any case, I won’t interfere. It’s up to her.”

“But don’t they have a good time together?”

Mrs. Yao raised her head. “They’re not out having a good time. They’re carrying out some business for the two of us today.”

She explained that during the Three Anti Campaign, many used goods came on the market cheaply. They all belonged to “tigers”⁵⁸ who had to sell them to pay off their debts. Luo Hou happened to find a brand-new phonograph, the same make as Yancheng’s. He bought it at once. But for some reason, the seller of the phonograph wasn’t selling his records. Maybe he had already sold them to someone else. Luo Hou bought many records, a few at a time. Some were records Yancheng didn’t have, and some were duplicates. Now Yancheng would soon be moving away. Mrs. Yao said that Luo Hou was an amateur at picking out records, so she told them to go and shop together. When the purchases were made, they could divide them.

Yancheng said, “The best thing would be for me to leave both phonograph and records with you.”

Mrs. Yao said, “I’ve been worried about that poor ‘tiger.’ Maybe he’s in prison? Or so poor that he doesn’t have enough to live on? Ah Mi said that to keep her Mama from worrying constantly about that ‘tiger,’ she’d buy the new phonograph and give it to Professor Xu. We’d keep yours in exchange. I don’t know whether you’ll agree?”

⁵⁸ Tigers: Mao Zedong’s term for large embezzlers, one of the targets of the Three Anti Campaign.

Yancheng said right away that he agreed. He didn't know whether he was happy or sad. He didn't wait for Yao Mi to return, but dejectedly took his leave. Mrs. Yao told him to ask Lilin when it would be convenient for the two of them to come for a congratulatory and farewell dinner. She said, "We'll only invite close friends. We had an old cook who still comes to visit me. I'll ask him to make a few simple, everyday dishes, and we'll just be together."

The guests who came to the Xus' house had brought the good news. Several groups of guests had come. Lilin couldn't decide whether she should go to the Yaos' and meet Yancheng. When Yancheng returned and she heard that Yao Mi hadn't been at home, and that Mrs. Yao had invited them for a farewell dinner, she was very happy and forgot to blame Yancheng for abandoning her.

Soon the couple received official notice of their assignment. They were busy for days on end preparing their possessions for the move. But no matter how busy she was, Lilin was always happy to accompany Yancheng to the Yao home. The piano had already been returned to the Yaos. The new phonograph had been given to the Xus, and Mrs. Yao and Yancheng had provisionally divided the records, each keeping the ones they liked best. Yao Mi was in the same position as many others; she had not yet received a definite work assignment. She worried only that she might once again have to work together with Yu Nan, Nina Shi, and their like. Mrs. Yao said it was the same everywhere, "Don't try to fix things."

The Xu couple had dinner at the Yaos' the night before they moved. The only other guests were Wanying and Luo Hou. On her mother's instructions, Yao Mi changed into a dusky red Chinese dress. On her bare feet she wore light gray suede sandals. At the square table, she and Lilin sat together across from Yancheng and Luo Hou, and Mrs. Yao and Wanying sat alone facing each other. The food was exquisite and wine was served. After dinner fresh tea was infused and they sat together chatting and talking about how they would write and visit each other.

Lilin was the first to take her leave. She said she had a few odds and ends to finish up, and the cart was to come for their

furniture early in the morning. Yancheng knew that the odds and ends were already taken care of. He said without ceremony, "You go on. I'm going to stay for a while."

Lilin could only go. On behalf of the hosts, Luo Hou escorted her to the door.

After a while, Wanying said goodbye and Luo Hou walked her home, then went on to his dormitory.

Yancheng delayed and sat for a time, but finally he had to stand up and take his leave. Mrs. Yao said, "Ah Mi, please see Professor Xu to the door for me."

Side by side they walked to the door. Yancheng felt as if there were an iron wall between them. Yao Mi turned on the hall light and opened the outside door.

Yancheng said wretchedly, "I remember every word you ever said."

Yao Mi didn't answer. The dim light was at her back, and the two lines of tears under her lowered lashes were just visible. Pressing her lips tightly, she nodded. She wanted to say something, but no words came. She waited until Yancheng went out the door, then very slowly closed it.

In turmoil, Yancheng walked a few steps, then turned back. What did he want to say? He wanted to say, "Please wipe those tears away quickly." But did he need to say it? Anyway, with her back to the light she probably thought he couldn't see. She thought that shutting her mouth tight would also hold her tears in. Yancheng stood by the door for a few minutes, then went home, taking the long way around.

Inside, even though the thick door was between them, it was as if Yao Mi could see him clearly. She could see how he walked a few hurried steps as if in flight, then fell back. She could see him stand by the door with his head lowered as if he wanted to knock and go back in. She saw him finally walk away, still looking back. She heard the sound of his feet, each step more distant, and thought he would choose the long way home.

She shut off the hall light, and in the darkness wiped away the traces of tears. Putting on a cheerful face, she said, "Mama, are you tired?"

Mrs. Yao said she wasn't. Mother and daughter talked for a while before going to bed.

Yao Mi thought of the pothole on the circuitous road Yancheng would take. She was afraid that in his misery he might trip and fall into it. She worried all night.

The next morning, Luo Hou arrived carrying a framed picture. He said the Xus had just left. In old Xu's study was a framed photograph which he had forgotten, and discovered just before leaving. He told Luo Hou to give it to Mrs. Yao. With a mischievous grin, Luo Hou said, "If you don't want it, Aunt, give it to me."

It was a photograph of Xu Yancheng when he was a university student.

Mrs. Yao said. "Give it to me. I'll keep it for you, until you have a home of your own."

Yao Mi suddenly had a frightening thought. She had taken great pains to keep her mother completely in the dark. But this mother who liked to play at Sherlock Holmes, was she really fooled? Not entirely, it seemed.

Luo Hou sat down and told them about the latest work assignments for the Institute staff. The library which had received Yao Jian's donation of books wanted Yao Mi to work for them. They agreed to release her from work for two years for professional studies. He himself was also going to work in that library.

Now the diverse talents the Literary Research Institute had gathered together were all scrubbed clean, and they all went their separate ways to their new posts.