

Dialogue

Xiao Lu

**Translated from the Chinese
by Archibald McKenzie**



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

www.hkupress.org

© Hong Kong University Press 2010

ISBN 978-988-8028-12-2

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

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

Printed and bound by Goodrich International Printing Co. Ltd., Hong Kong, China

Introduction

When you enter my apartment in Hujia Lou in Chaoyang, Beijing, you see my work *Dialogue* in the middle of the living-room. I eat every day at the L-shaped table in front of it. I designed the table to go with it.

The days pass. I don't know what day it is. I look outside. The ginkgo leaves are almost gone. It must be well into winter. I make myself a bowl of chicken soup. I sit at the table, thinking, chewing. I stare through the couple in my work carrying on their dialogue.

Blue jazz calls me. I stare straight ahead at the work. Waves of emptiness break over me. The things that happened then, the unknown future, the receiver off the hook make a white noise. I can't get through, not to society, not to other people, not to myself.

The deafening gunshots again.

Dialogue....

Bang! Bang!

Dialogue....

The gunshots at the '89 China Avant-garde Art Exhibition, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, on 5 February 1989 at about 11.10 a.m.

I think back, tasting the death of my body. I bite off chunks of my flesh, chewing and swallowing mouthful after mouthful till I have killed my pain.

My thoughts drift, lighting on fragments of the past. The river of time washes everything clean. My life, dislocated in every way, hopelessly, over and over, urges me to accept my destiny. There is no logical basis. I pray to destiny to give me the strength to confront myself and tell one woman's story.

In the story that I am about to vomit forth, the shadows of many other people may appear. Whether these people feature in insignificant meetings or

as unforgettable friends or enemies, the Chinese always set the occurrences of this world down to *yuanfen*, fate, beyond further verbalizing.

I live in my moods, float with them. This is my nature. When I am as distressed as I am now, I have to rake up the events of the past and expose them to the sunlight. If the toxic bad luck I release injures anyone, this will be my fault. Because I have for too long lacked the courage to face up to myself, the traumatic scars which have accumulated night and day around a chance occurrence brought me to the verge of an impossible situation.

Although I have not fully recovered even today, the crisis is past. Here, by means of what I have learned from the healing process, I just wish to tell the world where the origins of my illness lay. If any of them suffer from something similar and feel some sympathy for me, they may be able to read and understand my history. And if they cannot understand it at all, please do not let my nonsense anger you, but rather regard it as the delirium of someone in the throes of an illness.

On 12 April 2004, on the “What’s New” page of *Meishu Tongmeng*,¹ the biggest contemporary art website in Beijing, its Editor-in-chief, Wu Yi, published my new work *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003* and added the following editorial note:

Revisiting Xiao Xiao’s famous shooting at the ’89 China Avant-garde Art Exhibition, we see in her new work *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003*, the process by which a work with feminist characteristics is misread by society and by its era....



Fig. 1 *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003* (October 2003). (Photograph by Li Songsong.)

About *Fifteen Gunshots...from 1989 to 2003*

Heaven knows love.

Earth knows hate.

Ghosts know having

Neither love

Nor hate.

Fifteen years ago, after I fired the two shots at the ’89 *China Avant-garde Art Exhibition* at the National Art Museum, Beijing, and after he and I were released from the Dongcheng District Detention Centre, some intangible force attracted me, and from 1989 to 2003 we spent in all fifteen years together.

1. *Meishu Tongmeng* (Art Alliance), website at: <http://arts.tom.com>

Today I raise the gun again and fire fifteen shots at myself, one for each year. It is over between us.

I am not good at discussing theory, let alone art. I know how to be alive. The form of a work of art, its very existence, is just the manifestation of an inner demand. Depending on your psychology in any given situation, it may be a poem, or the firing of a gun. The word “art” adds nothing. It’s an instinctive survival mechanism. It’s where you’re at in life.

Xiao Xiao

Beijing, 23 December 2003.



Fig. 2 At about 11.10 a.m. on 5 February 1989, Xiao Xiao fired a shot at her own work *Dialogue*, at the '89 China Avant-garde Art Exhibition at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing.

On a winter day fifteen years ago, a woman shocked the art world by firing two shots in the National Art Museum, Beijing.

The Museum was closed down for four and a half days.² Major news media across the whole world, including the Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France Presse and United Press International, reported the event. It made instant history and startled people all over the world.

At that moment, a man entered my life. A misunderstanding, a woman’s fears and illusions, and her silence for the sake of love, allowed him to appear as a co-creator of the work.

2. From the afternoon of 5 February till 9 February 1989.

It was again a woman who raised a gun in late 2003 and took aim at photographs of herself, firing fifteen shots in all.

She was telling the world: “I was the sole creator of this work.” A dispute about who was to be recognized as its author brought to light some little-known history. The story begins with the gun.

April weather south of the Yangtze is like a woman, all moaning wind and drizzle. People call Hangzhou heaven. I was living on the second floor of the small country-style building facing the *longjing* tea hills, with the luscious tea hills and green trees meeting my eyes through the floor to ceiling windows of a single room dwelling. It was past noon when I lazily got out of bed, raised the window curtain and walked outside. The weather was gloomy, a fine drizzle fell, and my sadness matched the weather. The maudlin maid bemoans her nameless doom.

“Dreadful weather, raining non-stop, we’ll all be growing mouldy,” I muttered at the skies.

My life was frustrating. Let’s have some music to lift my spirit. Jazz in a mournful metre slowly permeated the air.

I got in the shower and turned on the taps. Water rushed over my head as I looked down at my somewhat flaccid body. “I’m getting old!” The water buffeted my body, but there was no way it could wash the melancholy from my brow.

I pushed open the shower door, put on a white bath-robe and went out. “Dagadagadaga”: the music was stuck. Pirate CDs! I went over and switched it off. In the sudden quiet, the sound of the rain splashing on the roof beat heavily on my head, and my heart gloomily sank.

I brewed a cup of strong coffee, went and sat at my desk, switched on the computer and discovered it was the sixteenth of April. “Heavens, I’d completely forgotten it’s my forty-second birthday.” I saw there was mail in my inbox and opened it. It was a letter from Gao Tianyu in America. I read it in one breath.

He wrote:

...I strongly support your speaking out about the facts. I also thoroughly understand why you are breaking your silence now, fifteen years later, to state the true course of events. On no account whatsoever should facts be suppressed. Facts are facts. One’s sense of responsibility to history is a test of one’s

character. And the proper person to set out the facts of this case is necessarily you, for you were the one most directly involved. Although individual emotions and the like might be involved in this matter, nevertheless the historical situation is not the private business of any one individual, but concerns contemporary art in China as such.

Also, this matter is not merely a wrangle between two individuals, yourself and Lan Jun, about the authorship question, but is about demonstrating that at any given moment in history, there can be various kinds of coincidental, distorting factors, such as revision motivated by individual interests, exaggeration and reinterpretation by the media, the collective fabrication of rumours among the broad masses and so on.

In the same way, rumours and allegations were rife during the French Revolution, as certain historians have shown. From this angle, your silence has made the valuable contribution of fully flushing out the phenomenon of collective rumour-mongering by so many people. Your exposure of the facts today is the greatest condemnation of this phenomenon. It also sends a warning signal to those of us who study history. There is often a great divide between a work of art as it proceeds from the ideas of the original artist and the version read by society. Before you fired the shots, the work belonged to you, and was private or individual in character, but after you had fired the shots and shocked society, the right to interpret it was no longer exclusively yours. The so-called "Gunshot Incident" was something which belonged to the period after the firing of the shots. Properly speaking, the shooting itself and the period before the shooting should be called "the work", but not "the Incident". For, according to you, you had not considered the aftermath of the shooting, nor had you planned the consequent events. All you had thought of was all the issues surrounding your work as such. The authors of "the Incident" were many indeed, including Lan Jun, but according to your account, you were the author of the work, and he was not.

I understand that being a woman may have led you to sacrifice the fame that is properly your own on the altar of emotion. As you say in your letter, this event is also a story about feminism. In particular, it is a story about being a woman in China. I very much understand what you are saying, that being female in China you are perhaps in an even better position to understand the essence of historical fabrication.

Gao Tianyu was in charge of the planning committee for the 1989 China Avant-garde Art Exhibition. To clear up the issue of the right to be acknowledged as the creator of the 1989 work *Dialogue*, I had, in February 2004, written separately to him and to Song Liwei, and had waited ever since for their reply.

Delighted to receive your letter. The best possible present for my 42nd birthday (today).

I sent it.

Indistinct tea farmers moved about the tea hills outside. The rain suddenly stopped. I rose, pushed open the door and went out onto the balcony and shouted, “Yes!” into the distance.

On 20 April, my correspondence with Gao Tianyu was published on the Beijing *Meishu Tongmeng* website under Wu Yi’s editorial notes. From 23 April, in quick succession, two articles appeared: “Replicating the Gunshot Incident — A Feminist Misunderstanding”, and “The Gunshot Incident Is Over, History Is Over, What Does It Mean Today? — Clarification Depends On the Facts, the History of Art Is Still Emotion”.

People were asking what the exact nature was of the shooting which startled China and the outside world on 5 February 1989 at the ’89 China Avant-garde Art Exhibition at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing.

The phone rang constantly with inquiries about the matter.

“Is it the case that you and Lan Jun have broken up, and that this is your way of getting back at him?”

“If you knew at the time that this work was yours, why didn’t you say something then?”

“Does love really have the power to make you share fame like that with someone else?”

A string of “why’s closed in, and for a time I did not know how to answer them. I went to the bathroom and washed my face with plain water. Then Wang Rui rang me from Beijing inviting me to take part in the 798 Arts Festival in Dashanzi. This was the exhibition “Language Without Borders 2004: Volume Control”, and one of the works was the installation *Dialogue* which I had just re-created. I had shot the original telephone booth installation at the National Art Museum on 5 February 1989. The other work was *Fifteen Gunshots... from 1989 to 2003*. I was also to perform a piece at the Chinese Modern Art

Exhibition. Over the telephone, he told me: “Xiao Xiao, for so many years, you have said nothing in public about *Dialogue*. For this exhibition, you must speak with your own voice!”

“Right! I’ll be there immediately.” I quickly packed and left for Beijing.

The taxi sped from Xia Manjue Long in Longjing Village towards the airport via Nanshan Road. As we passed the high wall of the Staff Residential Compound of the Academy, I suddenly called to the driver: “Stop! Stop!” He hit the brakes and my head knocked heavily into the back of the front seat. The driver cursed: “Are you trying to get us killed?” but I seemed to hear nothing. I rolled down the window with my left hand and looked at the familiar place where I had lived with Lan Jun. Bile welled up. “Quick, let’s go!” Before the driver had time to react, I shouted: “Hurry up! Let’s get away from here!”

The wind roared straight in through the open window, a flush rushed to my forehead from all over my body. My head hurt, and touching it I found I had indeed raised a large bump. I rubbed it furiously, wanting with all my might to rub away the unhappy memories, but the thoughts and emotions that filled my head were like wild horses stampeding in opposite directions, beyond any hope of reining them in.

The fifteen years of living with Lan Jun were over. Half a year ago, it had been just here in Nanshan Road that he had smugly used the phrase: “I no longer need you!” before swaggering off with head held high, brandishing his arms.

Nanshan Road. Luxuriant plane trees grew there, and their branches spread across the wide street, with oblique rays of sunlight filtering through, scattering light and shade on the grey street. When I was away from China, I discovered that what I missed most was Nanshan Road and its plane trees on either side. Each tree along Nanshan Road brings to mind my youth and transformations, and shares the weight of my sufferings and memories.

On Nanshan Road lies the Chinese Fine Arts Academy,³ renowned throughout China. My parents both worked there, my father as the Head, and my mother as a respected professor in the Department of Oil Painting. Today they are both retired. I was once the proud princess of the Academy, where I studied and started my academic career.

3. Until 1993, the Zhejiang Meishu Xueyuan, from 1993 re-named Zhongguo Meishu Xueyuan (The Chinese Fine Arts Academy).

The taxi delivered me to the airport. I was late and had to run most of the way to the plane. Going to Beijing felt different this time. I seemed unable to relax.

I sat down in a window seat, fastened the seatbelt, and the plane climbed through a thick-layered sea of clouds which was rolling and forming clusters, engulfing something, an omen of things to come. The blue of the sky above the tops of the clouds was so pure, a blue that you'll never see in the world below, deep and endless, without a shred of impurity. A line in Li Bai's *Gu Feng* sprang to mind:

The gross hand grabs the lotus,
the tread of low feet tramples ultimate purity.

Is there such a thing as "heaven" in the sense that people talk about? How good would it be to take a spaceship and have a look in outer space. To undo all one's worries, wash them away in the Milky Way and transcend the world. Foolishly thinking about these things I closed my eyes and couldn't help laughing.

"What are you laughing at?" the voice of the passenger in the next seat startled me.

"Me? Nothing. I was just dreaming."

"I'm really sorry to interrupt your dream."

I heaved a deep sigh. I was a bit put out. Regardless of whether I was sitting alone on a plane, or anywhere else, it was impossible to free myself completely from the interference of others. This world is a space in which one lives with others, and the wish to transcend it is just a dream.

After close to two hours' flying, we touched down at Beijing Capital Airport. I got into a taxi: "To Dashanzi."

"Dashanzi? I've been waiting for ages, and now I'm taking you for such a short ride, and just the one person. It's just my rotten luck."

The taxi-driver gave me a baleful look. He passed the Fifth Ring Road and emerged from Dashanzi Road, entering Dashan Bridge, before dropping me at "798", the old factory area which has been converted into a precinct of art galleries and studios. I was temporarily renting a 200 square metre studio there with a friend, Zhao Xiaoshu.

This was an old workshop which had been re-decorated as an artist's studio. "798" was the designation of the military factory built in Beijing in the typical Bauhaus style by the East Germans during the early period of national

reconstruction, and in the approximately forty years which had passed, it had gone all the way from splendour to decay. After the nineties, when many workers were laid off, many factory buildings lay idle. It was in this period that a group of artists came in and gave new life to this dilapidated factory area on the verge of bankruptcy. Thus Beijing 798 Arts Precinct was born.

I got rid of my luggage and went to the Xingxing Studio. I entered. Some people had gathered there and were chatting. Wang Rui, the director of the Studio, rose with a smile and introduced me to two other curators, Thomas and Dai Guang. He made room on a bench made of split logs and motioned for me to sit down next to him. Everyone was sitting on either side of a rectangular polished alabaster table left behind by the factory. I suddenly became the centre of attention. They were all smiling in my direction.

“What are you smiling at?”

“Nothing, we saw your correspondence with Gao Tianyu on the internet, and just thought it was quite interesting,” said Thomas. “Really? Quite interesting,” I returned his phrase.

“This work has now changed from what it was before,” Wang Rui told me and poured me a glass of white wine. I raised my glass and looked through it at the men, who were laughing in my face. I was dimly aware of their laughter becoming absurd. I felt I couldn’t remain there and rose to leave. Wang Rui motioned that I should sit down, “We hope that you will create a performance at the opening ceremony — you yourself decide what form it will take. Where in the programme would you like to go?”

“Last, I suppose.” I instinctively retreated.

“How about going first?”

“OK. You arrange it as you like. I’m going!”

I escaped from the Xingxing Studio in a hurry, leaving behind those strange smiles.

I went for a walk on my own along the narrow pathways of the factory precinct, and came to a café called “At Coffee”. I ordered a cup of extra strong Italian coffee and a chocolate sweet, and sat there alone for a while to settle down.

On the wall hung part of a poster for an exhibition in the factory precinct. On the old factory wall, traces of a Chairman Mao quote in black writing on a red background, a relict of that era, had been preserved intact. This was a place where artists liked to hang out.

The crowds entering and leaving the café, familiar and unfamiliar, all seemed very busy. I aimlessly stared at the wandering stream of people, and became more focused in my thoughts. What were all these people busy doing? They sat here, ordered cups of coffee, drank alcohol or other beverages, and spoke words with feeling, without it being clear whether they were responding to information from some quarter or just being prompted by their emotions. Their manner of being intoxicated with themselves filled the café, and held an overwhelming charm for me.

It was invisible, sensed, detached, concrete, abstract, blind...in brief, it was all in the awareness of the mysteries of each individual life. These were spirits who lived in non-reality, with ambitions which transcended the mundane. "Art" is a mere pretext. Its real meaning resides perhaps in these lives, whether invisible or not, rational or not: ineffable natural existences.

Some people caught sight of me, "Hey, we saw your letter on the web. That was really good what you wrote."

"Oh, was it?"

Before I could recover, another voice said:

"Hell hath no fury...!"

I had to get up and leave "At Coffee".

The factory workers were finishing work and coming out of the workshops in groups and lines, all of them in a hurry. Coming face to face with a female worker, I joined her in the stream. "Hey! How are you? You seem familiar — don't you recognize me?"

"All you artists here look a bit familiar to me. I see you every day, but I can't tell you apart."

"Don't worry about it!" Introducing myself I tried to get into her good books. The female worker walked with particularly swift strides. I had to increase my pace to keep up with her.

"You seem to have some urgent business?"

"Urgent business? I have to rush back to pick up my child, then cook dinner for my husband and the child. This is my urgent business every evening. Our life isn't as free as that of you artists, who don't have to worry about a thing all day."

Then she suddenly asked me: "Are you married?"

"No!"

"Then I bet you haven't got children either."

“That’s true.” I felt embarrassed by what she had asked me. How come I was nowhere near achieving the two great things in a woman’s life? I didn’t even have a boyfriend — this day was really getting to me.

“Yes, artists live in a different way from us, very free and easy.”

“What? Free and easy!”

“The lifestyle. Well, isn’t it? Whatever you feel like. But people like us are always busy with the small things in life. All artists are a bit strange, not really like us ordinary people.”

“We’re all the same, really.”

“How? I don’t think so. Take that modern art of yours. A mad mess, I simply can’t make head or tail of it, but there are so many people who say it’s good. People even say you can sell it for money, that stuff. Really! If you gave it to me for free I wouldn’t want it!”

“What you say is absolutely right. It’s like spinach and radishes: each has its use.”

“Well, then, am I the spinach or the radish?”

“You’re the spinach, I’m the radish — they’re both sources of vitamins anyway, not all that different.” My playfulness got the worker in a better mood — we’d finally found some common ground.

Chatting, we walked out of the precinct. On Jiuxian Bridge Avenue, we said goodbye. I crossed the footbridge and walked straight into Mei Mei’s Hairdressing Salon.

Once inside the hairdresser's, I said to the young woman behind the counter: "Could you get someone to wash my hair, somebody with strong hands; I've got a bit of a headache."

"Sure, I'll go and get you a young guy."

I sat down in a swivel chair in front of the mirror, looked at myself. My face looked tired, subdued in spirit, and I shook my head.

A young male hairdresser came, stood in front of the mirror, placed a large bottle of plainly packaged shampoo on the glass ledge. He energetically pressed the plunger on the bottle and cupped a handful of shampoo in his hand. With his left hand he took a plastic water dispenser, poured shampoo and water on my head and massaged them into a white lather in a moment.

"Your hair is very long — for how long have you been growing it?"

"Mm, a while," I said casually, remembering the year I turned seventeen, when I went to study at the Subsidiary High School of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. There were ten female students in my class. One day we went crazy and all went to a hairdressing salon to have our hair cropped short just like that. Next morning when we went for drill, we gave the boys in our class a fright.

"I haven't had my hair cut for over twenty years," I blurted out.

"What? You haven't had it cut at all for over twenty years?"

"Just maintained and trimmed occasionally, that's all."

"If you haven't changed your hair-style for so many years, you must be fairly conservative."

"Conservative?" I pondered the hairdresser's remark, felt that he was right to some degree. "This isn't too hard?" the hairdresser asked me.

"You can even be a bit harder, my head is very tough." The hairdresser vigorously dug his fingers into my scalp several times.

"That's good! Just like that, now I can feel something." I let out a deep sigh.

Someone or other's song was being played in the salon, the sound of a female voice, which one could hear intermittently uttering infatuated clichés from within. "What is love? It hurts when it comes, it hurts when it goes." Like an incantation the words were making my headache worse.

"Whose song is that?" I asked.

"Cai Qin's."

The lyrics evoked the earliest memories of my emotional life. I was unhappy in love. Everything became hazy....

The year I turned eighteen, I was on Jiangning Road in Shanghai. Luo An, a boy who had grown up with me, was walking next to me; the cruellest stretch of road.

He said to me: "I'm with that girl Ah-mei who sits next to you."

"What do you mean, you're 'with' her?"

"Well, it's like, we've got a relationship now."

"What do you mean, 'got a relationship'?"

"Well, we've got a male-female relationship now. I've never had this before, I don't know how to deal with it."

"So tell me, how do you want me to deal with it?"

"Can you forgive me?"

"Forgive!?" Forgive him for what? I myself couldn't work out either what exactly our relationship was, it was just that phrase "we've got a male-female relationship now" that made me feel uncomfortable all over.

Luo An looked at me and silently pushed his bicycle along, and I followed with bowed head.

"Why don't you go back?" I broke the silence.

"Are you OK? You don't seem quite yourself."

"Go! Why are you telling me all this?" I was beginning to get impatient. Luo An awkwardly mounted his bicycle and disappeared into the night.

I stood there stupidly in the middle of the road, seeing nothing, shaking, freezing, shivering. In that mid-summer night, I cried, the first time I had cried so broken-heartedly, my body sobbing. In my memories, innocent until that point, this was the first time that I discovered the meaning of heart-ache. Before I had learned what the relationship between love and the body was, the taste of being disappointed in love opened the great gate of my emotional life. That sentence "we've got a male-female relationship now" stung deep into my heart like a poisonous arrow.

“Miss, please rinse your hair over there.” The hairdresser’s voice shattered my train of thought. I followed him over to a reclining chair attached to a basin, lay down and laid my head back with the sound of running water behind it.

“Would you like conditioner?”

“Of course.”

After rinsing my hair, I returned to my original seat, and the hairdresser took a comb from a drawer and combed my hair as he blew it dry. Judging by the reflection in the mirror, it did look much more lustrous than before.

“Next I’ll give you a head massage. You said you had a headache, didn’t you?” He lowered the back of the chair and I leaned back. A pair of hands massaged between my eyebrows, hands of the opposite sex.

“A bit harder, please.”

“I’m already pressing quite hard. You look as if your headache is quite bad. When I saw you close your eyes before when I was washing your hair, and tensing your eyebrows, I bet you were thinking about something.”

“Some things which all happened in the past.”

“Why don’t you let the past go, don’t worry about it anymore.”

The hairdresser’s two hands pressed on the two sun-points on my temples and kneaded them in passing. “Relax, don’t think of anything, you’ve got to relax completely.”

I silently repeated the hairdresser’s words and did my best not to think about anything, but I heard again the sound of firecrackers.

It was the Spring Festival — when I was little I loved the Spring Festival more than anything. Ever since I was nine, we spent it with the family of my Aunt Qi. Luo An was the eldest son in that family.

“My mum’s beating me, let me hide in your house.” A fifteen year-old Luo An ran crying into our house. “My mum’s beating me because of violin practice.”

“Don’t be scared, you’ll be safe in our house, my dad and mum never beat me.” That day, Aunt Qi led him home, but didn’t beat him again.

Aunt Qi’s family lived in an old building at the end of a laneway off Jiangning Road in Shanghai. There were three boys in the family. Remembered after all these years, it seems like a faded black-and-white photograph, all discoloured, yellowed, gradually fading, but still there, just as in the old days.

We usually spent the Spring Festival's Eve there. The two families wrapped dumplings together. It had become a tradition. Every year as we were wrapping the dumplings, there was a small side-event. We would mix a coin and a peanut kernel with the dumpling filling and made two dumplings with one in each. If you got the one with the coin, your coming year would be rich and successful, and if you got the one with the peanut, you would have a lucky year.

That's how people are. A simple game ties their hopes for the coming year tightly to those two tiny dumplings. I remember how one year my sister Ge-ge, who is nine years my junior, cried: "Eat slower all of you, wait for me!" when she saw the grown-ups rushing to eat as many dumplings as possible. Finally she simply stood on her stool and went to work with both hands, grabbing the dumplings and giving each one a bite. When she sensed that they contained neither coin nor peanut, she let them drop onto the plate in front of her and continued to grab more dumplings. Everybody was amused by her frantic impatience.

After eating the dumplings, everyone would sit around the table, cracking melon-seeds, eating snacks and watching the Central Television Channel's annual Spring Festival Gala, gossiping about a lot of the sort of things that interest grown-ups. The children of the two families meanwhile rushed downstairs to a tiny garret on the mezzanine between the ground floor and the first floor of the house. Sitting cross-legged on the big double bed there, we spread out in battle formation and started playing *shififen* or *gongzhu* or similar card-games, the same every year. We were always excited by the sudden reversals in fortune.

Aunt Qi's family were brought up very strictly, and the three boys frequently received beatings. Our household was somewhat freer. In any case, on the evening of that day it didn't matter how noisy the children were, none of the grown-ups minded. Therefore the youngest boy in Aunt Qi's family once said: "This is the day I look forward to most in the whole year. Nobody keeps an eye on us!"

"You look as if you're thinking about something again; there's a smile on your face, it must be something good." The hairdresser's voice woke me from my Spring Festival happiness, his hands had stopped.

"Don't stop with your hands, I was just feeling comfortable."

"I've already finished, Miss."

“What, so soon?” I lay there without moving, as if I hadn’t been fully satisfied.

“If you like, I’ll give you a full body massage, but it’ll cost you another 30 *yuan*.”

“That’s fine.”

“Please come with me!” The hairdresser led me to an inner room, in which I could only see six single beds. I took my shoes off and lay down on one of the beds. The hairdresser casually drew a cloth curtain closed and his hands started kneading the pressure points on my body slowly and rhythmically. “Relax a bit, your muscles are too tense.”

With my breathing causing my body to rise and fall gently, I slowly experienced the meaning of the word “relax”. Relax: the days when I could fully relax were really distant now.

When I was in my second year at school, my parents were transferred from the Zhejiang Fine Arts Academy in Hangzhou to the Shanghai Institute of Oil Painting and Sculpture to work, and I went with them to Shanghai, where we lived for eight years on the second floor of a European-style house with a French garden on Fuxing Zhong Road. That was definitely the most carefree time of my life.

While I was in primary school, I fell in love with dancing. When I was in Year Three, the school’s dance group was going to put on a scene from *The White-haired Girl*. The girl who was to perform Xi’er had a name which sounded like mine. I danced in the corps. One day, the girl who was dancing Xi’er suddenly became ill, and someone had to dance her part without notice. I asked the teacher whether it would be possible to let me try. She looked at me: “All right then.” Just like that. I actually performed Xi’er in *The White-haired Girl*. Although I only danced Xi’er in one performance, it is needless to say how happy I was at the time.

When the Beijing Central Ballet Academy came to Shanghai to enrol young students and came to my primary school to select potential dancers, the female teacher took a shine to me. She discussed it with my parents. Would they allow her to take me to Beijing to study ballet? My father was hesitant. My mother refused immediately.

“I’ll give you another week and ask that you re-consider,” the teacher of the Ballet Academy begged them. My mother rejected her offer out of hand: “I don’t need even one minute to consider it.” My mother’s answer in that moment decided the course of my life.

“Why didn’t you ask me about it, as I love dancing so much?”

“Child, you’re still young, there are a lot of things you don’t understand. A dancer’s artistic career is too short, the training is very hard, and if you leave school at your age, all your studying will have been wasted. Dancers all have well-developed limbs but simple minds.” I looked at my mother. I didn’t understand her words. I felt that she might be right.

At the time, I was very obedient to my mother. I was a real goody-goody at home, and a typical A-plus baa-lamb at school. I remember my mother once telling me: “How come you never lose your temper? I’d like to see you lose your temper just once.” At the time I was as pure and serene as a pool of clear water.

I kept my dream about dancing until my fifth year at school, when an unforeseen accident forced me to give it up. That’s when I began to study visual art.

One Sunday afternoon, some children were playing high-jump in the courtyard. I was looking down at them from an upstairs window. They called to me: “Come on down!”

I ran down the stairs. They had piled some bricks on two stools and laid a bamboo stick on the bricks, and everybody was jumping over the stick in a reckless way: “Pile it higher, it’s too low!” They piled the bricks higher, jumped for a few rounds, and then added bricks again, and then it was my turn. I took a short run-up, leapt, my foot caught on something, and I fell headlong to the ground, my right foot suddenly without sensation. The others helped me up, but they saw my right foot dangling forwards and back. “Xiao Xiao has fallen and broken her foot!” the children in the courtyard all started shouting in a panic. My parents were drawn downstairs by the sound of shouting. My father took one look and without another word carried me on his back to the hospital at a run.

“Your daughter’s epiphysis has suffered a comminuted fracture. We’ll have to put a plaster cast on immediately.” That evening my whole right leg was encased in white plaster. The doctor told my mother: “The site of the fracture is not good. It is right in a growth zone. If we cannot make it heal in the future, one leg may end up longer than the other.”

I asked my mother, “Will I no longer be able to dance then?”

“Of course not. We’re not even sure you won’t end up crippled.”

“I might be crippled?”

My mother looked at me, stroking my plastered leg: “You might as well study painting, then, if you really are crippled, it won’t matter so much.”

In the shop windows, my mother started paying attention to orthopaedic shoes made with built-up heels. However, she had not resigned herself to the possibility of her own daughter really becoming permanently disabled. She made enquiries about possible cures everywhere, and finally found an old traditional Chinese doctor: “I do have a folk prescription that I could try, but I would have to take off the plaster covering. This is the only way the traditional medicine could be applied. You cannot tell the doctors about this. They would definitely not allow this procedure.”

“Allow it or not, the doctors all say they cannot cure it. If you can save my daughter’s leg — even if there is only a slender chance — I’ll do whatever you say.”

I do not know whether the daily applications of medicine had an effect or not. In any case I did grow a bit taller eventually. My mother’s resolve had saved my leg.

Mostly it causes me no discomfort, but when I went to Beijing afterwards to study and went to Beihai to do ice-skating for a physical education class, as soon as I had put on my skates and went out onto the ice, I immediately fell headlong. My right foot basically could not support the weight of my body, and I could only glide along on my left foot.

At the time of my fracture, I stayed at home for three months, not bedridden, just pottering about the apartment on crutches, bored to distraction. One day, I told my father out of the blue: “Dad, I want to study painting!”

“Excellent! My daughter finally wants to study painting!” My father happily brought out a Soviet Russian album of paintings for me to copy. I remember that album of paintings was by the Soviet painter Shelov. So to while away the boring days when I had broken my leg, I started studying painting.

On the weekends, my little sister would come home from her welfare committee kindergarten, and she became my first model. From an early age she was a lover of beauty, and when I had made a sketch of her, she would usually say: “Draw more beautifully!” Ge-ge’s sensitivity towards beauty was innate. I remember when she was very young, we went together to see a film. When I asked her about the plot afterwards, she couldn’t remember a thing about it, but said: “Sister, I’ll draw it for you.” Returning home, she would draw picture after picture, muttering under her breath: “...this outfit’s my favourite, just the colour’s too gaudy....”

“May I ask what you do?” the hairdresser suddenly asked me.

“What? What did you ask me?”

“What sort of work do you do?”

For a moment I had no answer. “I...I don’t know.” His hands stopped short, and after a moment, he said decisively:

“I know. You have a good husband who supports you.” I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“What? A husband?” How strange the word seemed to me. In my life I had never related to it. I wanted at first to refute him, but after a moment’s thought, it seemed better not to say anything. Who would be able to understand my situation in life? No husband, no children, no family, no job, no....

I fobbed him off: “You’re right, I do have a good husband who looks after me.”

The hairdresser had me roll over and started to pummel my back with both hands, as if he were chopping vegetables on a chopping-board, rapidly pummelling without a break. “I somehow think you don’t look the type who is supported by a husband.” He started asking me questions again, full of curiosity about this woman he was chopping up with his hands.

“I’m a painter. I teach at a school.” I wanted to give a normal answer to save him asking endless questions. A dim light bulb was dangling from the ceiling overhead, the light filtering through the lampshade of woven bamboo to fall on the dusky grey walls, faint light and shade.

My train of thought turned to the past again.

When I was seventeen, I qualified to go from the Shanghai City Second High School to the Subsidiary High School of the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts. Luo An had finished his studies at the Beijing Central Music Academy and had been assigned to the Beijing Children’s Art Theatre, where he played the violin in the Theatre’s orchestra.

Before going to Beijing, I returned to Hangzhou with him. I still remember how he and I were placed in the enclosed back of a small, completely covered army truck. His father sat in the cabin. The truck started, the heavy army-green canvas was battened down, and the truck bumpily started on its way to Hangzhou, the occasional ray of light penetrating and shining onto my face and his, now bright, now dim, probably not a good omen.

I also don’t know whether the grown-ups had deliberately arranged it like that, forcefully manipulating the destiny of this young couple, a boy and a girl at the threshold of love, in a hermetically sealed army vehicle.

We had to sit in the vehicle for three hours from Shanghai to Hangzhou, and it seemed that was the first time I didn't feel natural with this boy with whom I had grown up, and whom I knew very well. The grown-ups had frequently hinted at our future, but what exactly was this future? What did this concrete yet abstract word "marriage" really mean?

I must say that I was never with Luo An when a real curiosity and inclination towards the opposite sex awoke in me. At that time, he was still studying at the Beijing Central Music Academy, and when we happened to meet each year during the Spring Festival and during the summer and winter holidays, it was always when I was playing with all three sons in Aunt Qi's family. What made this acceptable to me was the close kinship with their household.

There was one boy who painted with me. His name was Xiaoqiang, and he really had made me feel a mysterious sense of caring. We painted, read and chatted together. Gradually I began to look forward to his yell beneath my window. Each time I heard him call my name, I'd excitedly storm down the stairs to open the door for him. That was an exceptionally pure kind of friendship in a period of budding youth, pure yet sensitive, and when I think of him now, I still get that feeling. Then one evening after I had passed my entrance examination for the Subsidiary High School of the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts, he very shyly said to me: "If you go to Beijing to study, I want to send you some money every month for living expenses."

"Why?"

"Because I like you."

I felt alarmed inside. This was the first time in my life that anyone of the opposite sex had spoken to me like this, and I was excited and surprised, embarrassed and unsure what to do. I told my mother. "Child, you're still young, it's too early for you to be thinking about this. When you get married, your husband's family will be of the greatest importance to you. Aunt Qi is so fond of you and it will be good if you and her son get together. Listen to mummy and you won't go wrong."

"Get married", "husband's family", such a specific future. Xiaoqiang was waiting for my answer, and I had to make a choice: was it to be the eldest son of Aunt Qi's family? Or Xiaoqiang? At a time when I hadn't the power to decide clearly, I completely surrendered my fate to the absolute decisiveness of my mother. So in this way I refused Xiaoqiang.

That was an age of dreaming, and I still had an attitude of vague detachment from the illusion of love. Having suddenly to deal concretely with a very much alive young man in person, I seemed rather frightened and timid. The fond dreams of youth did not reside in defined relations, but rather were about experiencing a kind of abstract romanticism.

Luo An and I sat facing each other in the truck on its way to Hangzhou. He wore glasses and was rather bashful for all his culture. The atmosphere was rather glum, and I felt uneasy. This was the young man my mother wanted me to marry. I got flustered and took out an English book from my bag.

“What are you reading?”

“*New Concept English*,” I answered, keeping my eyes lowered.

“It’s too dim in the truck. Can you see?”

“I have excellent eyesight, twenty-twenty.”

We said nothing to each other. Luo An looked outside, I read with lowered head, the English letters under my eyes becoming blurred as my mind started imagining. The phrases “green plums and a bamboo horse” and “innocent playmates” appeared before my eyes. These feelings became more realistic, and then distant and unattainable. My mood followed the atmosphere, becoming more adventurous, and childhood memories rose up and caused me to lapse into a dream of my own weaving, the childhood memories leading me on until I was entrapped.

“Why don’t you say something?” Luo An’s voice.

“I...” raising my head I keenly looked at him, then quickly looked away.

Travelling that time, there was no hint of romance, as I remember it, but there was a sort of burning emotion, a waiting for an as yet unknown future.

When I returned from Hangzhou to Shanghai, Aunt Qi’s family invited me to go with them to a photographer, and we had a very proper “one-big-happy-family” photograph taken. When I looked at it, I felt very strange.

Formally, it seemed I had already entered their household.

The hairdresser’s hands moved down my thighs, reaching between my legs, and strongly pinched the most sensitive part of a woman’s body, which was covered only by the thin material of my pants. “Don’t! Don’t do that!” I forcibly prevented him from continuing, by turning over and clenching my legs tightly together.

“What’s the matter? What are you afraid of?”

The hairdresser forced my body flat and stroked me from top to bottom through my thin clothes, softly murmuring: “Relax a bit more, relax a bit more, you’re going to enjoy it.” I held my breath, closed both eyes and felt a spasm of pleasure.

With an unspeakable feeling of disgust in the pit of my stomach, I sat up abruptly, and without daring to look at the hairdresser’s face, I put on my shoes and got out of the room. Flustered, I got to the counter and paid 40 *yuan*, pushed open the door and left the hairdressing salon without looking back.

I ran back. It was night, lonely, silent night. When I entered the large empty studio, I couldn’t breathe. I entered the bathroom, turned on the shower taps and washed my body furiously. I started crying, sobbing loudly. I don’t know why, whether it was because of the memory of that early love, or because of the hands of the hairdresser. I cried broken-heartedly, my body shuddering as I sobbed, out of control.

That night, all I knew was how to cry, I cried without stopping, there was no-one by my side, only myself, alone. Crying, crying, until I confusedly dropped off to sleep.