

# **Love and the Collective: Social and Psychological Marginalization in Zhang Jie's *Love Must Not Be Forgotten***

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## **ABSTRACT**

Examining the themes and characterizations in the seven stories that constitute her inaugural gathering of short fiction urges the conclusion that Zhang Jie is a perceptive and persistent critic of socialist ideology and traditional Chinese cultural and ethical norms as these bear on the lives and experience of post-Mao, mainly urban Chinese men and women. Characters who find themselves unworthy or insignificant are often in their author's view victims not of their own but of the ideology's, or the culture's, shortcomings. In the best known stories, "Love Must Not Be Forgotten," and "The Ark," the protagonists are female, but Zhang Jie depicts her male characters, as in "Under The Hawthorn" and "An Unfinished Record," with equal acuity and sympathy. Typically, her protagonists, like the heroine of "Emerald," are ostracized and/or marginalized by their fellow citizens, their talents and potential contributions at risk of being wasted. The burden of the stories is to show how it is harmful, as much to society as to the individual character, for this to be so. The humanizing or dehumanizing impact of ideas and behavioral norms determines how they are to be viewed. Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought and traditional Chinese values are viewed positively when they contribute to the proper existential formation of individuals and thence, from the ground up, to the building of progressive democratic society; and negatively when they impede these goals. Love seems to be the bedrock on which all else is built. Without love there can be no self-affirming, self-esteeming healthy subject for ideology, political

passion, or cultural value to take root in--hence the author's ceaseless promotion of a thematics of individuation as a prerequisite for any meaningful socialization or workable system of polity. Even the concept of Chineseness is dependent upon a prior conviction of self-worth, learned usually through the affirmation of others, which helps to explain the privileged place of feeling in Zhang Jie's fiction.

#### KEY WORDS

Zhang Jie

Chineseness

missing counterpart

*Love Must Not Be Forgotten*

feminist themes

ideology



This paper explores Zhang Jie's critique of socialist ideology and, to a lesser extent, traditional Chinese cultural and ethical values as each bears on the thinking and behavior of the characters in her first collection of short fiction—stories written in the late Seventies and early Eighties of post-Mao China. We follow Raymond Williams' neutral gloss for the conflicted Marxist understanding of "ideology": "the system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group" (69), the "group" in this instance being the CCP.<sup>1</sup> We maintain that characters who view themselves as unworthy, insignificant, or even "bad" members of society, are often in their author's view victims not of their own but of the ideology's, or the culture's, shortcomings. This is true not only of the author's misfits and eccentrics; it equally applies to those who wish to contribute to the public good and who have gifts to offer. Typically Zhang Jie's protagonists are ostracized or marginalized by their fellow citizens, their talents and potential contributions at risk of being wasted. This condition constitutes the central conflict of the stories, which show how it is harmful to the wellbeing of both the individual and the larger social group—be it family, work unit, or the state itself—for this to be so. As we use it, politics is understood to be the social instrumentation, or praxis, of ideology.

The best discussions of Zhang Jie's work have not surprisingly focused on the stories' feminist themes.<sup>2</sup> While informed by such commentary ours looks at the plight of both males and females, finding the former, when they are main characters, beset with personal and interpersonal struggles remarkably similar to those of their female counterparts. What is called Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought (the politically correct thinking and behavior code of the P.R.C. during

the time of which we write) is rarely the direct subject of a Zhang Jie story; nor is any other abstract system of thinking. She is interested in social and political behavior as expressed in everyday life, but only secondarily in its rationale. Indeed, the same rationale may be admirable or exemplary when embraced by one character that is foolish or dishonest as embraced by another. As is often the case, the humanizing or dehumanizing impact of ideas and ethical norms determines how they are to be viewed.<sup>3</sup> Such a sliding stance toward values urges their relative worth in the author's vision of heterogeneous human experience.

Ideology and traditional Chinese values are viewed positively by Zhang Jie when their embrace contributes to the proper thinking of individuals and, through them, to the building of a progressive democratic society; and negatively when they impede these same goals. In order to be positive, ideology and values assume a prerequisite, self-affirming subject to take root. A process of individuation is concurrent with socialization and politicization; but individuation requires if not a temporal at least a moral precedence over the other two. Only when the human subject is compelling to itself can it be compelling to others. This is the abiding paradox of Zhang Jie's work: the needs of community cannot be addressed until individual needs, not least those of affect based on strong interpersonal bonds, are first met.<sup>4</sup> For this Chinese author, even the identity of Chineseness is dependent upon a prior conviction of self-worth learned through the affirmation of others—hence the privileged place of feeling in her fiction.

As Lee has suggested, Zhang Jie is a writer "renowned for the depiction of the intricacies of feeling [...]" ("Politics of Technique" 186). In her best known story, "Love Must Not Be Forgotten," love is shown to be the single most important ingredient, not only in a marriage but also in the molding of a healthy self, and thus in the predisposition to serve the public, or collective good. The narrator Shanshan tells of reading her dead mother's diary. She discovers that the mother, a committed Party member and creative writer, had loved and been loved by an older married man and important government official. Years earlier the mother had married and divorced Shanshan's

father, whom she never loved. The diary's testimony appears unequivocal: the ability of mother and cadre to remain loyal revolutionaries, making personal sacrifices, enduring private austerities and public persecutions at the hands of political rivals, is due in no small part to the succor of their never-consummated love.<sup>5</sup>

From a professional and material point of view, Shanshan judges that the diarist's was a "life full of failures" (3), all that survived her being a loving daughter, a twenty-seven volume translation of the works of Chekhov and, of course, the diary. Yet the latter teaches how the mother was the beneficiary of an extraordinary emotional constancy, which made all the difference. The writer titled her diary "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" as a posthumous admonition to the daughter with whom she often spoke on these subjects, and whom she knew to be searching for a soul mate. The diary implies that love provides the strongest of life-scripts. "We agreed to forget each other," the mother addresses her lover-cadre. "But I have deceived you. I have never forgotten" (9). In another entry she informs him that she used to walk a small asphalt road, "the one place we once walked together [...]. Then, though you were not beside me, I knew you were still in the world and felt you were keeping me company" (12).

The story is touching, the evocation of the mother walking on the road, knowing that the cadre (because now dead) no longer keeps her company, even tragic. The one thing imaginably worse for mother and daughter—the former really, the latter vicariously—would be never to have known or been inspired by such a love in the first place. At least one commentator has stressed the literariness of the mother's love, it's Chekhovian provenance.<sup>6</sup> She further argues: "By reconstructing the mother's life in writing, the narrator is able to rewrite the story of a woman's destiny so that independence rather than romantic attachment to a man will become her priority" (Liu 43).

A problem arises with the assertion that Shanshan repudiates the mother's notion of romantic attachment. Evidence corroborates that she severely questions the love's literariness, its extremeness, even calling what her mother characterizes as her "wretched idealism" a form of insanity. Yet simultaneously and consistently the filial

narrative betrays a grudging admiration for what might be called the diarist's textual erotics. It may be that Shanshan's creator is herself torn between the priorities of ideology and those of love.<sup>7</sup> Having quoted a hyperbolic passage, the character muses: "Remembering those lines I often reflected sadly that few people in real life could love like this. No one would love *me* like this" (6, italics ours). Not only does she not repudiate her mother's notion of love, Shanshan further decides not to marry the man she has been dating (and is bored with), opting instead to hold out for her "missing counterpart." She even knows that the paths of such a person and herself might never intersect.

There are worse things than not marrying. What truly would be "tragic" would be to marry to avoid being judged a "heretic" by those with "old ideas." Mindless marriage expectations are scorned, while simultaneously the point is made that the implementation of socialism hasn't begun to unknot the ties between present and past in cultural thinking on love. But maybe it's just as well. Shanshan's resolve constitutes neither a plunge into solipsism nor a longing for a Blakean "free" marriage—alternatives that would be thoroughly un-Chinese. Rather, it secures for the diarist's daughter moral independence and self-respect in the world as she finds it. Shanshan imagines that communism will one day do away with loveless marriages; meantime, she'll avoid placing "the chains of an indifferent [one]" around her neck (13). Even in death, then, her mother's passionate attachments, both to independence of thought and the priority of human relations, provide the daughter with models of behavior requisite to her choosing freely, i.e., both non-conventionally and non-ideologically, what is best for her. Contrary to what Liu argues, "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" is the mother's story, not the daughter's. The latter's will begin after the present account ends, with the living out of her resolve, not to spurn romantic attachment but to hold out for one worthy of the name "love" and, if not that, then none at all.

In "Emerald" once again we have an exemplum of dedication to socialist goals built on the self-validation conferred by love. The protagonist is of the same passionate intensity as the mother-diarist in the title story, differing only in that she proves that a love that catalyzes

to political activism need not be reciprocated. "Emerald" also reminds us that Shanshan's faith in a better future owes its prompting to the constancy of her mother's love for the cadre and her, and not the hope of finding a "missing counterpart." Zeng Linger is a brilliant mathematician and political theorist, thwarted in her political idealism by the society she wishes to serve. Tagged a Rightist and "bad character" during the Cultural Revolution, she has spent years in exile in a "border region" (18). The existence of her illegitimate son Taotao, whom she raised alone, before he drowned in an accident at age fifteen, was never disclosed to his father Zuo Wei. Recently politically rehabilitated, Linger has published an article on microcomputers catapulting her to international fame.

The story opens with Lu Beihe telling her husband that their college friend is going to be invited to be part of an experimental production team at their research unit. Beihe hopes that Linger's brilliance will recharge her spouse's lackluster career, since he will be heading the experimental microcode group. Beihe's husband is Zuo Wei, whom she caught on the rebound from his affair with Linger twenty-five years earlier. The story is set in E City, a coastal resort where Beihe has invited Linger to meet her in order to pop the question concerning the production team. The reunion of the two women in the hotel restaurant is memorable because, despite her own worldly successes and the deprivations that have been suffered by her companion, Lu Beihe finds herself envying Linger. Partly it is the other's bright, colorful clothing contrasted with her carefully chosen socialist drab grays. But more it is Linger's spirit that engages Beihe's imagination. She concludes: compared to her friend's hers has been an "aimless" (57) life, spent being dutiful to a man unworthy of love and enjoying the bourgeois comforts of his family name and the traditional house, in Beijing, that came with it.

Linger asks for time to think over Beihe's proposal. She has trouble sleeping and goes for a walk on the beach, where she encounters a wailing woman. It is the bride she had met earlier with her husband on the train to E City, where they were going to honeymoon. The couple had been swimming when the husband suddenly

disappeared. Linger suspects he has drowned in the whirlpool off of Tiger-head Rock. While comforting the woman, Linger mulls over the dramas of the moment and those of the past: her conversation with Beihe earlier, the bride's loss due to drowning, Taotao's drowning ten years before, the indignities perpetrated upon her over the years. She reflects, too, on her relationship with Zuo Wei, for whom she has more than once put herself at risk. The groom's tragedy carries a lesson, Linger concludes. Though she had once saved herself and Zuo Wei from literal drowning, one escaped metaphoric drownings all of one's life, if "only by chance" (60); risk-taking is proof of a life lived fully engaged.<sup>8</sup>

Linger had read earlier the horoscope for her birth month, of its precious stone emerald, and the single word "ardent." Ardency epitomizes Linger's spirit, just as it is markedly absent from the etiolated spirits of her friends. In the restaurant scene, she had mildly chastised Beihe for speaking self-pityingly of the sacrifices she'd made all her married life for Zuo Wei. "If you love, you don't describe it as a sacrifice" (57), she said. Spurning both anger and revenge, Linger cannot withhold her vital self from a world in need of betterment. She will join the experimental group, not for Zuo Wei's, or Beihe's (or even her own) sake, but for the good of the collective. Thus with Linger, as with Shanshan's mother, love informs social and political choice, lending the impetus for the self-affirming character to acquit herself generously. Not irrelevantly, the author takes pains to note that one of the loves informing Linger's generosity is her father's for her and her mother. A simple fisherman now dead, we are told he so loved her mother that he never remarried when she died "long ago" (56).

"The Ark" is Zhang Jie's novella of three professional women contending daily with personal and institutional sexism in post-Mao, socially conservative Beijing. The women are the writer Jinghua, Liang Qian, a film director, and Liu Quan, a translator. Each is forty, divorced or separated, and grappling with a special problem at work and numerous complications in her personal life. As former schoolmates, two live together in an apartment secured through the influence of the third's, Liang Qian's, father. Bailey complains of an "alienating" self-

pity afflicting all three characters, while arguing convincingly that the use of the third-person narrated monologue is an effective tool “to ensure identification with and sympathy for them” (110, 104). The negative social implications of the chosen singleness of each woman also create considerable reader sympathy.

Jinghua is a Party member and theorist forbidden to publish. She has a history of loyalty to and periodic censure from the CCP, and suffers from a degenerative back ailment contracted from hard labor during the Cultural Revolution. Pregnant during the rule of the Gang of Four, she had an abortion, refusing to inflict such a world on a child. Her husband responded by beating her so she divorced him. Despite the brutality of her own marriage, she still believes that men and women might cohabit happily.

A victim of cinema industry exclusion for many years, Liang Qian has finally had the opportunity to produce a film she is proud of, but which the puritanical male-dominated Party approval committee is dragging its feet on. Meanwhile, her husband refuses to divorce her for fear of losing the clout he has as the son-in-law of a high official.

Liu Quan’s broader intercourse with the world and unclear work situation, plus her anxieties for the sake of her son Mengmeng’s preparation for life and a chronic lack of confidence in herself, all conspire to place her at the mercy of callous and petty-malign people on a more regular basis than the other two. She is engaged in a story-long attempt to be transferred from her job with an export company to that of translator at the Foreign Affairs Bureau, where her talent and training in English will be better used. Manager Wei is another reason Liu wants to leave. Her boss, Wei cannot abide that; unlike other women, she will not automatically obey him. Having invited Liu to his office, he lounges on a sofa, one leg over the armrest and the buttons of his trousers undone, revealing “colorful underpants usually worn [...] by women” (137). Wei once libidinally rubbed himself against Liu on a public bus. More than any character in the book, Wei epitomizes the unguarded exercise of male tyranny over women, reacting with stereotypical disbelief when sexual intimidation doesn’t work.<sup>9</sup>

However eccentric of progressive morality or anomalous among

contemporary Chinese males her superior's behavior may be, Liu Quan's social conflicts differ more in number than in kind from those of her two friends. All three women are engaged in a losing struggle with an older, culturally inscribed "plot" of ceaseless humiliation occasioned by their de facto singleness. Even the physical attitude of each is arrested, hobbled, or static, betokening psycho-imaginative paralysis and entrapment. The author's point is unavoidable: in post-Maoist China, to be divorced or single and not a widow, and living with others of the same sex similarly unattached, places a woman in a category of public scorn somewhere between that of a sexual wanton and a bastard.

Zhang Jie depicts the degradation that Chinese suffer at the hands of fellow Chinese in "The Ark." Some of the loss of dignity has its source in the prejudices of females, and of course not all the males are mean-spirited. Tellingly, two who are compassionate—An Tai, Jinghua's Party Branch Secretary who, unsolicited, procures a diathermy machine for her aching back, and Zhu Zhengxiang, who goes out of his way to save Liu Quan's new job for her—are linked both with healthy ideas on love and women who love them unambiguously. Still, the males who count—Manager Wei and Jinghua's wife-beating former husband and Liang Qian's spouse—reflect anachronistic Confucian male-dominant ideas of gender behavior and/or spousal hierarchy.<sup>10</sup>

While foregrounding the theme of women-without-men and their specially burdensome lot due to intolerance, the novella additionally critiques the letter-versus-spirit embrace of socialist principles by political cadre and non-Party member alike. In a reverse paradigm of Marxist utopianism, the ideologically earnest are seen to soldier on largely unheeded, while the narrowly self-serving inherit if not the earth at least the cushier jobs and other perks of a system far likelier to reward the cautious and unquestioning than the intense and honest citizen, male or female. Zhang Jie's view of the rigidly controlling Chinese central government, as mirrored in lower-level Party bureaucracies, is beginning to emerge as well; it will take a more absurdist turn in *As Long As Nothing Happens, Nothing Will* (1988),

her aptly titled second collection of short stories.<sup>11</sup> Finally, although “The Ark” raises questions regarding the likelihood of any suppressed group achieving equality, the fact that this one is composed of women who want only to assert their personal brand of creativity on the “new China,” reminds us that the issue of gender remains a vexing one. In notes on her trip to China in 1974, Kristeva rooted the problem in the failure of the CCP to integrate the Chinese feminist movements of the earlier twentieth century into its peasant and worker movements (112–27).

Four stories in the *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* volume feature male protagonists. The first, “The Time Is Not Yet Ripe,” might be said to resemble “Emerald,” if the latter were focused on Linger’s unimaginative (and unworthy) former lover Zuo Wei, instead of on Linger herself. Told in a third-person limited point of view, “The Time Is Not Yet Ripe” chronicles the efforts of an underachieving engineer and Party hack fast approaching middle age to thwart the promotion to the rank of Deputy Director of a close friend from college days—Cai Depei.

Though Cai is far better qualified than he, Section Chief Yue covets the appointment himself, as a reward for years of putting the Party’s interests before his own. He goes to elaborate lengths to justify his inhibitory stratagems relating to Cai, but his rationalizations only underscore Yue’s naive presumption that because he is a member of the CCP the collective good is necessarily served by virtually any course of action he might take. Ironically, Yue is frustrated in his plan by a decision of Party higher-ups to waive the age ceiling for Cai and promote him anyway.

Unlike the protagonists dealt with so far, Deputy Chief Yue is no victim of fate or sexism, the perfidy of friends or the vagaries of Chinese politics; neither is he burdened by traditional values nor his own idealism. He reflects no inkling of his contribution to his being a professional nonentity. All he has, in defense of his lack of distinction, is the dubious conviction that he has been more self-sacrificing than others.

“The Time Is Not Yet Ripe,” by featuring the least humanly

attractive protagonist, illustrates better than any of the stories in the volume the impoverishment of a social and political order that values staying power and blind patience over individual initiative and genuine moral dedication to the causes of “the people.” Worse, Yue incarnates a Party-induced false consciousness, his “innocence” being intellectually dishonest and socially dangerous in the bargain. In fooling himself he fools others as well, since most, like him, continue to be duped by what he appears to be. This includes his wife Huifen, his former classmate Little Duan, and Cai Depei, who is convinced that his old friend Yue has had a hand in securing him his promotion—which of course, when he sees he’s lost what he really wants, Yue sheepishly takes credit for, thereby reinforcing his habit of self-obfuscation. Schwartz astutely compares the CCP’s identification of itself “with the Jacobin notion of the virtuous vanguard which virtually embodies the general will of the people,” and of history itself (134). Through petty-bureaucrat Yue, Zhang Jie satirizes this same virtue-by-association, Party-generated mentality. Jonathan Spence has tracked the slippery slope traveled by the writer Ding Ling, who saw the mentality operating at the highest Party levels as far back as Yan’an, dared to criticize it, and paid dearly for her pains (*The Gate* 285–340).<sup>12</sup>

Of the remaining three pieces in the volume, two—“Under the Hawthorn” and “An Unfinished Record”—depict males whose plights are similar to those of the females already discussed, except that neither of the males is ideologically driven. Both are older, one being near death, the other not having anything to live for. The first may be mentally ill and each is acutely withdrawn, self-marginalized if not marginalized by others. The extremity of the withdrawal of the two leaves the impression that the theme of aloneness haunting their narratives is due less to social than to personal, or existential, factors. Both stories are gems of brevity and psychological intensity, stressing the anguish of characters convinced that their lives and worldly achievements have been negligible, with death soon to bestow the final indignity. Still, unlike Deputy Chief Yue, and Beihe’s husband Zuo Wei, in “Emerald,” these males embody traits their author obviously finds attractive.

“Under the Hawthorn” begins in a sanatorium where Wu Cangyun sits alone, at a table in an orchard, watching the inmates on the first floor ward balcony turning their gazes toward the main gate in anticipation of visiting hours. Wu awaits no visitors. His thoughts dwell instead on how the hawthorn came to be there, the only tree of its kind in an apple orchard. Like the hawthorn, he concludes, his own “history was obscure, dim” (92). “Under the Hawthorn” explores what it means—and feels like—to have no worthy precedent narrative of self, therefore “no comfort, desire or will.” “[Wu] knew in great detail the life stories and the hopes of the other inmates. But he had no story of his own to tell” (92). Wu obviously has a past; what is lacking is one that he can deem respectable, and hence worthy of recapitulation.

There occurs a human interaction between himself and another which leads to a dramatic change in perspective for Wu, but if he has (or has had) a wife and children, we never learn. A flashback recounts his disbelief at being summoned to the phone one day to talk to a woman, calling to inform him that her husband Juru had committed suicide the night before and giving him details of the wake. Juru is the only visitor Wu has ever had at the sanatorium. There are recollections of conversations with him, echoes of his voice, a gripping presence in Wu’s memory, though even that is fast fading. Wu cannot accept the fact of Juru’s means of death. Juru lived “his life as quietly as a shadow” (94). He seems to function as a double for Wu. Wu’s unwillingness to hold his friend and the idea of suicide in the same thought exists because people like themselves, who have no life, cannot take what isn’t theirs to begin with: this truth is brilliantly and subtly rendered by Zhang Jie through a surprise visitor of Wu’s.

The interaction alluded to above begins when a child suddenly appears at Wu’s table and asks permission to sit down. Wu calls the child “lad,” but she replies “I’m a girl,” made to look this way by the medicines “they” keep giving her to stop her from seeing “things upside-down” (97). She begins to cry. To appease her, Wu offers to tell her a story only to realize that he has forgotten any he might once have known. Instead, she tells him her story of sickness, financial sacrifice and forced separation from her family, which lives somewhere “deep in

the mountains” (98). All this occurred over an unspecified span of time, as the anonymous “they” treated her for her intermittent affliction of seeing things upside-down. Listening to the child, Wu experiences strange powers of physical sensitivity, like hearing what a gecko crawling over his foot might have been saying, or the sigh of the child’s tear as it falls on a blade of grass before vanishing into the soil. He remembers that these were powers that his friend Juru had possessed, and intuits that Juru, even in death, is teaching “him [...] how to see and feel life” (98). Without planning to, Wu performs three services for the child. Alerted to her emotional burden, he provides the listening audience that suffering requires; next he affirms her gender, a crucial aspect of identity and an essential element in any movement toward wholeness or wellness; finally he normalizes her affliction, assuring her that she “can see perfectly well” (99).

“Under the Hawthorn” is different, both in technique and content, from the other stories in the volume, save “An Unfinished Record,” with which it has notable similarities. Reminiscent of Sartre’s and Camus’s fictions, both stories focus darkly on extreme self-isolation, that dreadful aloneness the cure for which may seem completely beyond the means of the afflicted. With its stress on the absence of a retrievable personal past, “Under the Hawthorn” raises Kundera-like questions about the connection between continuous and disrupted consciousness in the maintenance of individual and cultural identity. It is also postmodern in its use of self-reflexivity, both human and textual. It concludes: unless you are part of a whole, you are, as Wu thinks of himself, “almost invisible” (92)—alive, but of little use until joined to others and their stories, interpolated into the larger social “text.”<sup>13</sup>

The latter trait marks the story as quintessentially Chinese—and Zhang Jie-like. The itemization above of the services Wu performs for the child evokes the nurturing roles played variously by parents, lovers, children and friends in the lives of the principals in the stories looked at thus far. Such roles are crucial because, for this author, without the validation by others it is impossible to be self-validating and hence capable and desirous of contributing to transpersonal goals. “Under the Hawthorn” gives the lesson a further spin by hinting that those who

acutely experience isolation may be best able to confer inclusion on their fellow isolates. The common bond is suffering, which in its near-unbearable forms allows one to hear the “sound” of the suffering of others with preternatural acuity. Juru had been a writer. Wu imagines him, dead but wandering the “noisy world” of the living, “and when he’d finished listening, when he’d heard everything, he would exclaim [...] ‘Beautiful! Oh, beautiful!’” (96). It is no wonder Wu finds Juru’s name incompatible with suicide.

“An Unfinished Record” is a first-person narrative detailing the thoughts of a man reluctantly leaving his apartment. We never learn his name (though he does comment at one point on its infelicitous sound), only that he is the author of a multiple-volume history of Ming-era China, who is about to enter a hospital from which he has no hope of exiting alive. Like Wu Cangyun, he has no family and no relatives. He possesses no private identity, only a professional one, having earned the respect but not the closeness of his co-workers at the institute where he works and takes his meals. His only intimates are his pet cat, named “The Grand Historian,” and the memory of an extraordinary woman he knew at work years earlier, who gave him the closest thing he’s ever experienced to romantic love. This love, though one-sided (not only were they never actual lovers, it isn’t clear if the woman even knew of his feelings for her) was kept alive through the historian’s memory and in the form of three long-cherished fetishistic metonymies: the first initial of her name written by himself on his bedside table, the wrapping from a book she once borrowed and returned, the string that bound the wrapping. Recollections of the woman, including snatches of her conversation and laughter, her husband’s conversation with him (on the occasion of their wedding, which he attended), together with the narrator’s dialogues with his cat, constitute the “action” of the story.

Like Wu Cangyun, the protagonist of “An Unfinished Record” is convinced that he is a cipher. But for him there has been no redeeming event such as Wu’s inadvertent helping of the child, only the passive acceptance of the woman’s gift of “a tiny fragment of her life” (87). Astonishingly, it seems to have been enough. Margaret Decker

concludes that the fate of Zhang Jie's historian echoes that of Sima Qian, China's first historian, serving as "a reminder of the fate of intellectuals from the time of Sima Qian [...] to Mao Zedong" (296). As a reward for his candor, Sima Qian of course was unmanned by an angry emperor, while Zhang Jie's anonymous historian is reduced to cultivating his memory and the friendship of a cat to satisfy social and affect needs. A broader reading than Decker's finds the story's lessons applicable not only to the plight of writers and intellectuals, but also to the fate of individuality itself in the conditions of mass social life.

From our angle, "An Unfinished Record" is reminiscent of the title story with its emphasis on the austerities but also the life-giving power of love. Despite her historian-narrator's negative assessment of his soon-to-be-completed "record," Zhang Jie repeats the message that love bestows dignity and significance on even the drabest, least outwardly remarkable of lives. The emphasis on the capacity of love to overcome the severe material and emotional constraints of contemporary existence would seem to place the author in tension with the Marxism she also embraces, by implying that ideology, unaided by some kind of extra-personal emotional and/or social referent, isn't enough for survival in a devouring world.<sup>14</sup> Zhang Jie's lovers and ideologues alike endure, bolstered not foremost by political and social abstractions but, as we have seen, their hope for, belief in or recollection of, (usually) mutually nourishing personal relations.

Theodore Hutters remarks that the question of the individual's isolation from society has been a central one in Chinese letters at least since Lu Xun's 1918 "Diary of a Madman," and that "alienation is virtually inseparable from the concept of modernity itself."<sup>15</sup> Hutters makes his observation in reference to the late Fifties, a period of enormous pressure on writers to hew to the Party line (laid down by Mao in his Yan'an "Talks") and essentially deny this "self-society split" (18). As we have just seen, instead of denying it, Zhang Jie reveals the split to be a chasm for at least two of her self-reflecting heroes. This is a long way from Robert Hegel's notion that the Chinese Marxist artist, in "Bodhisattva-fashion," partakes of revolutionary social change, carrying others with her "to a higher stage of political

consciousness, and hence, in certain regards, to a higher level of being” (13).

When she isn't overtly “contest[ing] the master narrative of the Communist revolution,”<sup>16</sup> Zhang Jie seems to desire the benefits of the new order while retaining the old courtesies. The last story in our coverage, “Who Knows How To Live?” begins with the thoughts of Shi Yanan and Wu Huan, two friends and factory workers, *vis-à-vis* Tian Ye, the ticket-seller on the 1176 bus they ride to work each day. Wu Huan is self-assured and outwardly self-possessed. Friends envy his sophistication and worldliness; he carries a translation of Spinoza just to impress. He is athletic and “transcendental” (103) in his friend Shi's eyes, who by contrast is introverted and lacking the kind of idealized masculine traits he and others project onto Wu. Wu is also possessed by—and flaunts—a sense of class superiority and class distinctions.

In time fellow workers sense that Wu Huan is in love. He helps the ticket-seller maintain daily order on the bus, and intimidates a “rascal” (104) who tries to frustrate her as she does her work. Tian Ye is a model public servant, scrupulous in the performance of her duties yet flexible and kindly to riders, stranger and familiar alike; she is associated with the “now totally disregarded” art of public courtesy (102), as well as with a sophisticated responsiveness to both poetry and graphic art. Shi Yanan, seeing Wu's shows of chivalry toward her, is jealous. Wu, meanwhile, has written a letter making clear to Tian Ye the nature of his feelings for her.

A would-be writer, Shi discovers that a poet whose work he admires and the ticket-seller are one and the same. He is overwhelmed with personal unworthiness, and resolves to stop taking the bus each day to work. His decision is prompted by an incident from the previous week, involving Wu Huan and Tian Ye, which in turn was prompted by their encounter when Wu went to her empty bus with the expectation that Tian had found his letter and been pleased by its amatory declarations. She hadn't read the letter but, guessing its contents, in a “terribly stern” (107) manner had lectured Wu for not respecting himself and her by writing it in the first place.

Subsequently, Wu tries to anger the ticket-seller in turn. When she follows him off the bus one day, expecting Wu to buy a pass, he instead scoops out a handful of coins and dumps them into her hands, causing most to fall on the ground. Shi is appalled by Wu's bad manners; he also realizes for the first time that he is implicated in his friend's petty bourgeois pseudo-sophistication, cultural elitism and lack of personal sincerity. When he discontinues taking the bus, it is to avoid being connected with Wu in the ticket-seller's eyes.

By marrying, perhaps not altogether realistically, "old society" (109) behaviors with those of the socialist present, "Who Knows How to Live?" teaches that even the humblest of jobs can model good citizenship. Not all from the past is bad; equally, not all that is new is to be embraced. Whatever has been gained with the overthrow of the old ways by communism, certain desirable civic virtues have been sacrificed in the bargain. Such lessons are not easily dismissible because Tian Ye, the story's role model, is no mere pawn of the state, naively taking a menial job seriously. She is also a "talented writer" (104) who refuses to hierarchize her two forms of employment, pursuing each with equal zeal and—not irrelevantly—a sustained sensitivity to the feelings of others. Shi Yanan's suggestibility to her good example is of course prepared for by his prior rejection of the patently false model of "how to live" represented by Wu. Once again Zhang Jie embodies in her protagonist the themes of passionate personal conviction and self-sacrifice for the collective good, despite the indifference of many. For this author revolutions are furthered not by the majority but by an informed and dedicated remnant. The idealism of her main character is shown to have a life-changing, conversion effect on Shi, who imagines, at the end, while sitting on his bicycle watching the 1176 bus pass by, one day resuming his acquaintance with the poet-ticket-seller, but only after he has become a "little more like [her]" (112).

Though we have referred to and commented on, in passing or in Notes, most of Zhang Jie's published works, as well as the variety of criticism it has provoked, this inquiry has limited itself to a single volume of short fiction on the presumption that an in-depth coverage is

more desirable than a broader, necessarily more superficial one. Our aim has been to promote the reputation, craft, and ideas of a contemporary Chinese author to (mainly) Western readers who may know her already only by an isolated story or two. Zhang Jie is a master at probing the ethical, artistic, and social implications of a China committed to the rationalist premises of modern political governance but one that, as ever, seeks to maintain continuity with its long past with its intrinsically conservative cultural and social values. Cognizant as she must be of the prospect of ideological censure from an establishment that has proved itself all too efficient at making negative examples of its writers,<sup>17</sup> she has nevertheless been persistent and unapologetic in promoting those aspects of socialism that represent improvements on the past way of dealing with communal and individual needs, and condemning those that aren't. The conflict in her stories between the needs of individuals and those of collectives (families, work units, etc.) is due in no small part, we believe, to Zhang Jie's conviction of the prior claim of self-worth as a fundamental building block (and therefore guarantor) of a stable and progressive society. Her frequent citation of Western (usually classical Russian and British) literary role models to justify her belief in a civilizing humanism shared by all cultures lends credence to our fixing on character, the moral relations between characters, and the relations between characters and the various communities they belong to as the enduring focus of her work. We urge this writer's importance not only as a contemporary woman, but also as a highly nuanced critic of post-liberation Chinese life.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bercovitch: "[...] ideology is the system of interlinked ideas, symbols, and beliefs by which a culture—any culture—seeks to justify and perpetuate itself" (635). Commenting on Mao Zedong's interpretation of the social function of literature, Hegel states: the writer replaces "his particular consciousness with the desired ideology of the community [...]" (13). Whether Williams' "group or class," or

Bercovitch's "culture," or Hegel's "community," the only legitimate formulator of political "desire" in China after 1949 until the early 1990s is the CCP.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Liu; also Chen; and Meng. Wang calls "The Ark" "China's only feminist work about Chinese feminists" (175). Liu surveys the emergence of a female tradition in Chinese letters from Ding Ling into the post-Mao era against a backdrop of efforts to co-opt female subjectivity in the name of an all-subsuming Party orthodoxy. Particularly relevant to our purposes is Meng's more radical charge of the desexualization of all subjectivity, male and female, and its consequent politicization in the image of the Other, i.e., the Party itself (133–35). On the post-Enlightenment Leninist (as opposed to Confucian) provenance of the Party leadership's presumption that it "incarnates both the will of history and the will of the masses" (134), see Schwartz 125–38. Link provides the best retrospective overview of what he calls "the socialist Chinese literary system" (which he demarcates from "about 1950 to about 1990") (4), to date.

<sup>3</sup> Of "The Ark," Barlow says: "Humanism rather than any doctrinaire or foreign feminism, offers the most aptly calibrated intellectual weapon to the insurgent Chinese woman writer and critic" (Intro. 8). Cf. Zhang Jie's claim that if she "has an iota of human feeling," it is owing to "the humanism in classical literature" ("My Boat" 204). In the same vein, Duke quotes the author (from the published transcript of an audio tape of July 1980) advocating in very non-Marxist language a literature of "human dignity," one that would uphold "the beauty of human nature" (*Blooming* 50).

<sup>4</sup> See again "My Boat," where the author blames her weak sense of class struggle and "low political consciousness" on an autobiographical absorption in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western fiction, yet "rejoice[s]" at having been made more human by this exposure (204).

<sup>5</sup> Louie thinks oppositely, that the romance between cadre and mother "hinders their efficiency as professionals" (Kinkley 73). In so judging, he of course ignores the mother's insistence that love and intense commitment to an especially austere Marxism were opposite

sides of one coin, and hence that struggles pursuant to the goals of one reinforced and validated those pursuant to the goals of the other.

<sup>6</sup> Our choice of a likely source for the type of misery between the diarist and her cadre is Chekhov's "Lady with the Dog." The association of suffering, deferred consummation and death, as adjuncts of grand passionate love go far back in Western letters. For the psychology of deprivation, especially, as a sign of passionate purity and commitment, see de Rougement.

<sup>7</sup> See Hsia on the tension in many traditional Chinese stories, occasioned by the storyteller's "equal commitment to the covert ideals of self-fulfillment and the explicitly endorsed ideals of virtuous conduct sanctioned by the culture" (307). The tensions between traditional Chinese thinking on the self and its proper relationship to the social order on the one hand, and Western ideas of subjectivity as appropriated by early twentieth-century Chinese modernists on the other, are brilliantly laid out by Denton in his "Introduction" and "Conclusion."

<sup>8</sup> For Zhang Jie as engagé artist, see Bailey 97.

<sup>9</sup> Prominent among the forms of male domination, cited by Croll (12-44) as having been practiced historically upon Chinese females, are: 1) infanticide, 2) footbinding, 3) loss of natal family status upon marriage and the fate of being judged a success as a spouse on the sole basis of producing male issue, 4) the so-called "chastity cult" of widows. Just how limited were her opportunities for cultural expression is hinted at in Stacey's judgment that suicide, as a rebuke to her spouse and his family, "was almost the single recourse to brutality available to a Chinese woman" (43).

For an account of an actual 17<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese marriage (featuring childlessness, wife-beating, spousal abandonment and, ultimately, murder; plus the operation of a provincial Chinese legal system brought to bear on the responsible parties), see Spence *Wang* 99-139. The author interlards his narrative with fictional ones by the master storyteller of the same era and locale (rural Shandong), P'u Sung-ling.

<sup>10</sup> Stacey (15-65) details with admirable thoroughness the

contributions of Confucianism and neo-Confucianism to the development of differing gender roles and behaviors in Chinese society from the earliest times to the modern era.

<sup>11</sup> See especially the stories “Today’s Agenda,” “The Other World,” and “What’s Wrong with Him,” for Zhang Jie’s Dickens-like rendering of governmental bureaucracy’s endless circularity. At the first-mentioned story’s ending, a Party City committee meets to consider an agenda the exact same un-acted on items of which were first considered eleven months earlier, at the story’s opening; in the intervening time whole interlocking systems of committees have been considering these and related items. The charge of all, emanating from the Central Committee of the CCP, is to improve the treatment of intellectuals.

*Heavy Wings* (1981), the author’s only novel to date, focuses on a government ministry and an auto-works unit under its aegis, highlighting conflicts between older and younger cadres jockeying for power within both systems. Roughly contemporaneous with it, the novel reflects the same either/or, idealist/jaded-pragmatist duality found among the characters in the *Love* volume. Both volumes lack the authorial detachment and absurdist humor of the later *Nothing Happens* stories.

<sup>12</sup> For the reader unfamiliar with the scapegoating of writers and intellectuals by the CCP, or with the “proper” role of the writer and the function of literature itself, as spelled out by Mao in his famous *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art* (1942), an excellent starting place is Duke, *Blooming* 1–28. A more extensive discussion of Mao’s ideas, and his powerful sway over the thinking of others on the subject over his long lifetime, can be found in McDougall and Louie *Literature of China* 189–207.

<sup>13</sup> See Hegel (7, 16–17) on the social face of Chinese fictional characters. The author emphasizes the inextricability of the concepts of self-development and group commitment as generated by both Confucian and Taoist traditions; also the role of duty to others as a crucial ingredient in Chinese self-esteem. See Hsia for the seminal treatment of the social self as reflected in traditional Chinese fiction.

<sup>14</sup> With regard at least to the first half of this statement, Louie would surely agree. He writes of the mother-diarist's love for her cadre in the title story: "This Keatsian romanticism is utopian and idealistic and unrelated to Communist materialism" (Kinkley 73).

<sup>15</sup> Individualism (and the excesses commonly associated with it) in Chinese life and letters seems to have required the conditions of the full-blown modernity ushered in by the May Fourth Movement in order to make its legitimated historical appearance. See Lee ("Literary Trends" 464–80) for the impact of that movement on Chinese culture generally, and on women and new writers in particular.

Lau and Hsia provide fascinating discussions of covert versions of individualism in pre-modern Chinese drama and fiction, some of it dating to Sung and Yuan times. Both writers are particularly good at conveying how and why extreme behavior (even in pursuit of an unambiguous ethical good), in a culture that extols the mean in everything, would be perceived as erring on the side of solipsism.

<sup>16</sup> Feuerwerker (147) finds a struggle between political orthodoxy and realism in the post-Mao "peasant style" writings of Gao Xiaosheng. We have been arguing that the same "contest" is no less a persistent feature in Zhang Jie's fiction.

<sup>17</sup> See Note 12 above. Surveying the Second Hundred Flowers policy of 1977–1981, Duke (*Blooming* 1–28) describes official vilification campaigns against the play *What If I Really Were?*, in early 1980 and, the following year, the film script *Bitter Love*, via various Party hacks and organs. Duke's is an instructive, blow-by-blow account of the manner in which the CCP has historically intervened with, celebrated, silenced, and censored Chinese artists, writers, and intellectuals.

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