

Waiting
for
the
Advent

Li Ran



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LISSON GALLERY

Godly sorrow

Li Ran

There are some things I never mentioned to Li Yuan. After we graduated from college, Li Yuan published several poetry collections, and I once commented bluntly that the poems were too intense. It may be that my appreciation of long poems has always been prejudiced- they are not modern! I feel that the lack of clever musical sense and the over-utilization of parallel antithesis in long poems have cast away the essence of poetry. Li Yuan had argued with me on this before. I didn't enjoy quarreling with him as I was clear that I had my prejudice, so I usually just ended the conversation with a silent nod. It wasn't until the day he told me that he went to a church in Hankou — a state-sanctioned Three-Self Church¹, that our friendship reconnected on a new level. It seems that an act of iconoclasm has tied us together in a new way, our superstitious obsession over language broken on the basis of theological ontology. Nevertheless, his poems at that time were filled with biblical symbols, such as “Red Sea, Jordan River, Veil, Rock, Vision...” This is

not really the kind of poetic theology I appreciate. When the textual symbols are too explicit, they always block the vision of the poem. But this is something I did not mention to him. In fact, it is also a problem I often encounter when dealing with poetic passages. But is any of this really that important?

In 2010, we met again in Guangzhou, and it might be our most recent meet-up, if I remembered it right. I did not talk much about the church with Li Yuan as I was afraid that he might mistake my theological standpoint towards the Holy Spirit. Living in a period where Charismatic Movement was frowned upon, I did not wish to bring him any trouble regarding the matter. Ironically, though, I am not even a Charismatic Christian. In our last meet-up in his unadorned rental room, we shared a good deal of ideas on the historical contexts of poetry and theology. About our discussion I could not remember the details, rather,

1. The Three-Self Church (Chinese: 三自教会; pinyin: Sānzì Jiàohuì) is a colloquial term of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM; Chinese: 三自爱国运动; pinyin: Sānzì Àiguó Yùndòng), the official government supervisory organ for Protestantism in the People's Republic of China. The three 'Self's are self-governance, self-support, self-propagation.

it was the humidity and heat in that rainy season of Guangzhou which took over my memory of that day, like the smoke that permeated the room, unable to dissipate. His room was loaded up with soap opera scripts, earning him 2000 yuan per episode, accumulatively a considerable income if he kept on writing. Nonetheless, I don't think this job of ghostwriting comes easy for him, as I have almost never read any novel or prose published by him. Back then, Li Yuan was still working for a magazine, at a time when traditional print media was about to decline. I am still impressed by how we talked all night long, staying up till the break of dawn. Speaking from experience, the more people speak, the less they tend to remember what they really said. So what did we really speak about on that day, after all? I don't think our conversation reached too deep on any topic though, as about a decade ago, we were still naively fantasizing about our literature-oriented careers. We were unable to be serious about anything, and in the end, our conversation tended to turn to mundane topics surrounding our livelihood, relationship problems, or uninteresting commentaries built up by complaints. Nevertheless, we kind of enjoyed all of these as a new way to amuse ourselves. But you have to admit that some people are like this. They rest in their small comfort zone, long enough for them to rightly isolate their "pure and angelic" hearts from the rest of the industry. They disdain the unspoken rules of society, yet they could only cuddle each other for warmth and support in their vulnerable and obscure social circle. It is always a good thing to have mutual support though, that was also how we survived through the decade.

It has become harder to survive in recent years, especially for those whose youth has faded away, the burden of life stacking up on their backs. Ever since I came to Shanghai, I always spent my time with Lao Gao, Xu Min, and Da Lei. Lao Gao writes poems too, but honestly speaking, it is not something you can do well by working hard. I once showed Lao Gao some poems Li Yuan wrote in the past, which he commented as an awful mess. I feel that Lao Gao's criticism was too harsh, even unreasonable at some point. Lao Gao is a few years older than me by age, and left school early, following a bunch of vagabonds for a few years. Lao Gao was fond of talking about the culture of small social circles formed by a group

of people with a certain level of power in society: he knows better than anyone who is the leader, who is the follower, who is the molester and the molested, details about their drunk conversation, their unsolvable power conflicts, as well as all sorts of gossip in the circle. When he speaks about the wild and free spirits of the art community in Shanghai a decade ago, he concludes everything regardless of triviality as "I myself am a personal experimenter!" I remember meeting him in Nanjing, he liked wearing a cap back then, looking reserved but unafraid of socializing.

Although I had my own thoughts and comments about Li Yuan's old poems, I could not agree with Lao Gao's brutal criticism. But Lao Gao is such a person whose words are often charged with emotions. In about 2010, Lao Gao published a poetry collection himself and gave one to each of his friends in the circle. During that time everyone in our circle in Shanghai knew Lao Gao's name, and he indeed became a big name. It was then that I came upon Lao Gao's poems which were uploaded onto online platforms. I read a few of them and they were light, lively, and tactfully written. But I know that short poems can be written well easily, while longer poems like those Li Yuan wrote, with tens of lines filling up the whole page, are much harder to write in comparison, at least not something I am good at writing. That being said, nobody can be this consistent like Lao Gao, recycling the tone in his work after all these years, as if murmuring to himself. His way of expression can seem a little anti-intellectual if put into today's context. I once suggested to Lao Gao that as experienced writers we should work on the profundity of content rather than compromising our creation with simplicity of form, if not we limit ourselves to easy writing. I always thought Lao Gao would get what I was trying to say, however, I was wrong. Once I was speaking about art criticism, and Lao Gao was suddenly agitated. He interrupted me by saying "That's not true, no matter if it is the criticism of the surrounding scene or criticism in a broader historical context, both should be valued equally. Rather, I find criticism towards our surroundings can, by contrast, better show our equality and presence..." Well, from what he said I knew that he totally got me wrong. Of course, I was aware that creative writers are vulnerable and extremely sensitive: they could not easily get over the slightest verbal criticism. As such,



anything harsh should be toned down and told implicitly, or even through nuanced and subtle facial expressions. Ms. Pan is an expert in using such facial expressions to convey criticism. She is not quite the same as feminists in recent times, she is more like the earlier batch influenced by feminist awareness in the 80s. And through the days she has learned to talk more about equal rights rather than stereotyping feminist concepts. People like her are often talkative, yet she knows how to measure her speech.

I generally admire such people, but I was also afraid to face her when she spoke. She is good at analyzing one's problems, a rare ability among her peers. Lao Gao needed this though, but he did not dare to look into her eyes and listen. Although Ms. Pan was not bothered by vulgar and pretentious middle-aged men like Lao Gao, she has no tolerance for any didactic, patriarchal voices. She is not really a poet, although, when I first learned of her it was through an online literary forum in the year 2006 or 2007. She had a few novels reprinted under the "Novel" section, one was namely *Humbled as the world*. Although the title is not intended for notions of Christianity,

the story is rich with fantastic twists. At that time, she was influenced by Jean-Philippe Toussaint and Alain Robbe-Grillet, which was quite evident in her writing. Speaking of which, *Collection Minuit* was considered a niche popular book, but I think that in China, it is just a kind of old-fashioned science fiction novel, in which the main protagonist always shows up in different scenes, but is always inevitably controlled by the invisible goddess of fate. So he recalls the Oedipus relationship with his mother as a child and the forever-absent father. So he kept splitting himself, from an open square to a small alley, from the rural area of Shenzhen to the Bund side of Shanghai, the endless white snow-capped mountains of the Northeast or the experimental coffee plantation in Yunnan. Aside from the splitting of the protagonist, it was more like randomly ordered shifting of scenes..., of course, I cannot describe a novel like this in such a simplified way, because it is difficult for me to recreate the linguistic skill, dynamic choreography, and detailed and brilliant portrayal of her writing. For example, when describing the morning light and shadow, her writing presents that vivid diffusing effect, and when describing the sculptor nestling painfully in front of the female body sculpted by herself,



she freezes that extraordinary early-morning moment in time, without any unnecessary diction of anguish. Her way of writing is like a simple, unpretentious whisper, and I once told Ms. Pan that this passage reminded me of a William Blake poem, but she was not impressed, perhaps she thought I was mocking her artistic leanings. In general, she hated the small circle of poets, its rigid rules and rights, and the endless complaining about the marginalization of Chinese poetry. Indeed, as Li Yuan also said, “In what country is poetry not marginalized?”

My attempt to talk to Ms. Pan about William Blake was in fact out of ulterior motive, although I did not expect her to see through my intentions. In terms of the title of the novel, Ms. Pan may not have known the theological meaning of “humble,” as the whole plot was pervaded by the idea of “splitting” rather than “humbling”. There was a time when Xu Min tried to analyze the problem of dealing with real-life events in Ms. Pan’s writing, but in the end, Xu Min always preferred to talk about “people” instead. It was because, perhaps, his impression of Ms. Pan was a girl from a wealthy family. He once told me that among the authors

who returned from overseas, those like Ms. Pan still hold a certain level of self-awareness: “Do you think the other few are really leftists? Have you ever seen a leftist wearing Balenciaga? A pair of those sunglasses is worth half my monthly salary.”

Other than Lao Gao and Ms. Pan, Xu Min was the third person whom I spoke to the most. Since I left Beijing we had fewer chances to meet but we still interacted online from time to time. Xu Min is younger than me by 5 or 6 years and got into the literature industry later than me. He held an independent perspective of criticism while somehow keeping at the bottom of his heart, a classical humanistic spirit, I guess? I could not be sure, but I think he would not accept the idea of “splitting”, as he said, “How can we not talk about subjectivity? We have to talk about subjectivity! This is what is most lacking when we talk about creative works nowadays. We always talk about materials and elements, but what is the point after all? You say that you are doing field research and delving deep into the realistic context, you think you are a humanist, and you call a three-to-five days trip a field investigation...”. But Xu Min is a person who can hide his emotions, except

for when he meets Ms. Pan, when he is often at a loss for words. I always wondered, can Xu Min really have any deep communication with Ms. Pan? I guess he could not notice the subtle expressions on her face at critical moments, the look of compassion through her half-shut eyes, often wrapped elegantly in the discussion of socio-political issues. I think that many people would say Ms. Pan was just lucky to live in an era when the literary world desperately needed a broad realistic scenario, or rather, an era when everything a woman did was right. Regarding this, I feel that Lao Gao’s prejudiced views seemed a little overbearing, or were they simply out of jealousy?

In recent years, Xu Min has also been having his own sentiments. I told him earlier in the year that the circle we were both in was meaningless, as the literary scene of practice was all within one’s self. Relatively speaking, maybe I am rather a close-minded person, but Lao Gao was even more so, he enjoyed leaving the rest of the world outside of his closed door, and hiding in his small room, never coming out or meeting anyone. He might be what we always call “a person living in the past”, except for occasionally showing us his new writing and getting some mutual support, he did not show any other concern for the happenings in the literary circle. He seemed to have a few friends though, who were contemporary artists, and I guess this may be a way for him to survive his days and get around writing a made-up press release or a 500-word review for exhibitions because, after all, the art scene was easier to get around. The self-media era has allowed more information to be easily accessible, when speaking about the few poetry reviews written by Da Lei, to my surprise, Lao Gao had read them before. Although he did not like Da Lei, they had muddled along in the cast and crew and worked together on TV scripts, which was a tiresome job with little pay after sharing it with many others. According to Lao Gao, it was a murder, love, thriller, action, and suspense drama, with all kinds of cliché pieced together. It still had to make sense though, so that it would not confuse the actors. They started shooting one episode once they finished writing two episodes, sometimes even the director was unaware of the ending of the series. Eventually, they decided to stay with the cast and crew, and they shot as they wrote until the investors withdrew from the project. I always thought that after doing all of these

works together, Lao Gao should be close to Da Lei, but from Da Lei’s view, he did not dislike Lao Gao but despised him from his heart. He found him an uneducated person who was always fooling around. On the other hand, the reason why Lao Gao disliked Da Lei was that he looked down on stubborn old men like him who spoke with a pedantic voice. From my understanding of Lao Gao, he would not even analyze Da Lei’s creative works, let alone take the initiative to read them. So it was a little unexpected of him to secretly read Da Lei’s poetry reviews.

On the last day of 2017, I moved from Beijing to Shanghai, as Da Lei did so too in the past. During our time in Beijing, we did not have much communication, except that we had spoken at a seminar in Beijing. I did not really enjoy starting a conversation with the seniors, and it was mainly because I could not bear to see their condescending faces. The first time I met Da Lei, I was still in school. At that time, he was already gaining some reputation in his circle, and had published long novels and essay collections in university presses, and of course, he occasionally wrote poems and was moderator in some academic forums. He liked participating in and organizing public literary activities or author seminars. As he said himself, this is called “academic self-governance”. In recent years, the epidemic and the extreme censorship of the arts have taken a direct toll on this kind of work, and so it gradually died down. About three months after I came to Shanghai, I suddenly saw a message from him saying that we could get together sometime. Since then, we have been getting together from time to time, and I often took the initiative to go to a café close to his house and sit and talk for a day. Except for Xu Min, Da Lei looked down on all of my other friends around me, criticizing them for being poets of the sensational school. It is rather rare to see the kind of leftist attitude that Da Lei holds in recent years. In his eyes, there was always an enemy in the system, which was one or a few very specific figures in his mind, everytime when I talk to him, I was reminded of those evangelical pastors who loved to logically debate the fundamentals of theology. Da Lei liked to criticize the way of portrayal where symbolism is used excessively. He would not countenance reading the novel written by Ms. Pan, to him it seemed like a kind of decadent bourgeois sentiment. He

has talked to me about many writers and fellow poets around him, but he has never commented on me directly. There were a few times when I wanted to hear him say something but I was also afraid of him doing so, perhaps he would not be straightforward with me either: it would seem embarrassing to be too harsh to a friend, yet too light of a comment would seem insincere, so there is no point.

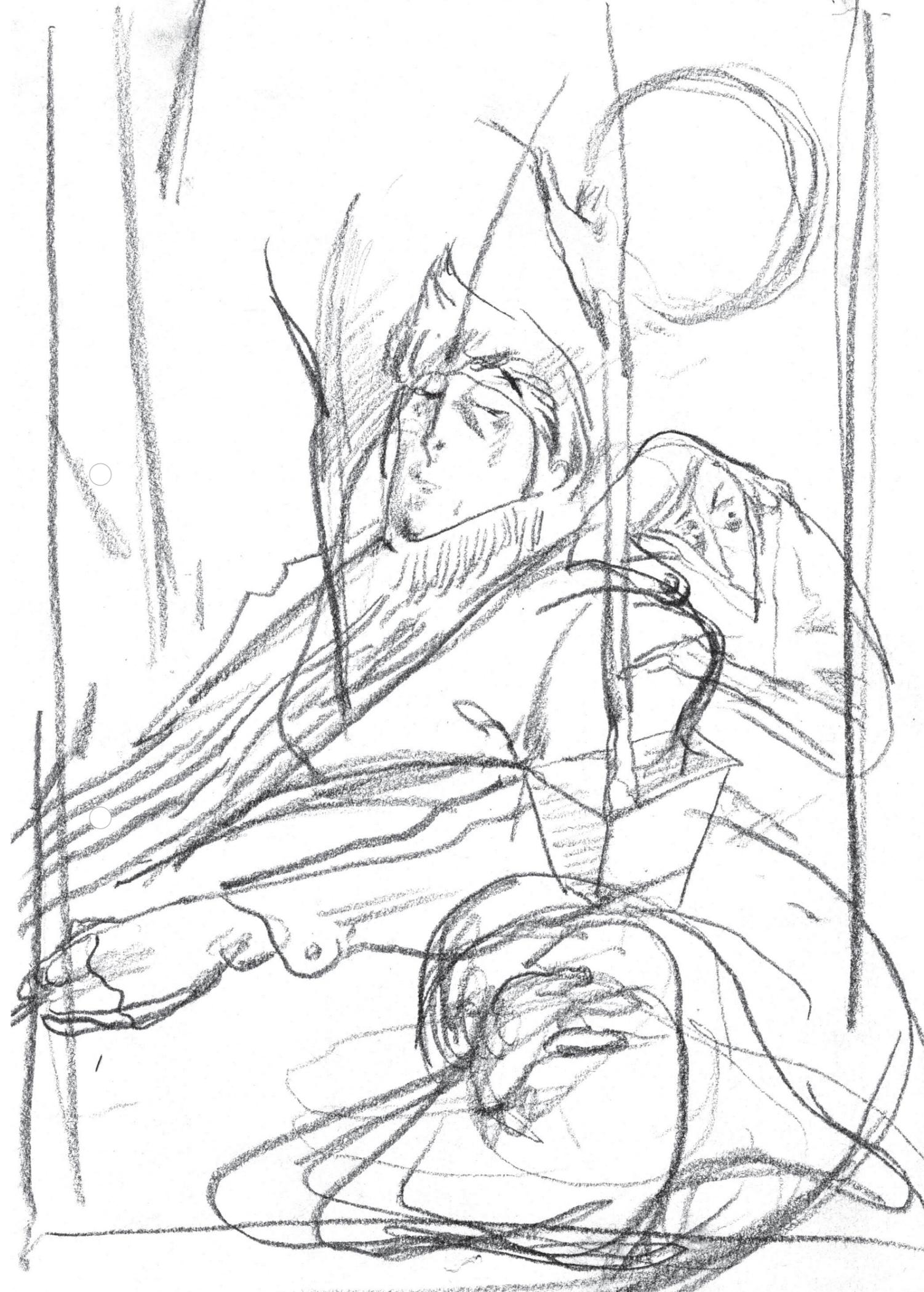
Opportunism was Da Lei's favorite term used in criticism, and it was what made leftists like Da Lei back down from the front line of socio-political criticism. He always considered the spontaneous reaction to events as a form of opportunism and an extreme simplification of writing. Da Lei's recent novels are becoming more like a kind of long-lost reportage, I agree with him that "simplification" is a problem, but to only use opportunism as a critique is also a kind of simplification. In many cases, Da Lei could not hide his private emotions, which made me think of my other friend from Beijing, Jiang Lu, who always exuded a similar motivated spirit as Da Lei, so I always said to Da Lei, "You should get to know Jiang Lu." It is not that they did not know each other at all, but Jiang Lu always said, "I hate these people in Shanghai," which he repeated over and over, and he would also always ask me, "When are you moving back to Beijing?" I was used to his questions like this which popped up all of a sudden. Before leaving Beijing, Jiang Lu and I met with Pan Xiao – which is Ms. Pan, we called her Pan Xiao Jie² because her real name is Pan Xiao – at her house, we drank and talked all night until 4 am. Pan Xiao's husband, who was probably unhappy with our conversation, went back to his bedroom early in the night. Now I still remember Pan Xiao's hesitant voice saying, "Why did all of you want to leave Beijing?"

Jiang Lu showed his disapproving face again, I knew that there always lay in his heart all kinds of unspoken words. Even in the dim light, I could see his sharp Adam's apple and the slightly unpressed orbicularis muscle around his eye, while he said things like "No friends are forever", and he also said, "No enemies are forever". When I was in

Beijing, I always had his voice playing on a loop in my ears, like about ten years ago, when I said I was going to give a lecture on Osip Mandelstam, and I gave a cursory description of my perspective, and halfway through he interrupted, "It's okay to talk about Osip Mandelstam, many people like to talk about him, but when you talk like this, are you going beyond the existing views and presenting anything new about Osip Mandelstam?" Similar words of his have been echoing in my head for years, as well as: "Still doing that formal language thing?" But in the next second he would advise you to "polish your language where needed," or he would say, "Don't create with personal emotions, too much emotion will lower your standard." Then he would say, "You guys who have families, beware of moving into the middle class." When there was nothing left to say, he would stir up something a little aggressive by saying "Christianity is against humanity, don't be obsessed with it and go all the way," or he would interrogate, "When are you going to start over?" After a moment of silence, he would then ponder, "Can you understand the new reality?"

Yes, he is the one who often pushes you to crush the rhetorics, to reaffirm your standpoints, attitudes and perspective as an intellectual, as well as new realistic problems. He shared the same long-standing desire as Da Lei – "to knock down you capitalists, sycophants of white people, opportunistic intellectuals, compradors for consumers of the exotic, parasites of the systems and you snobs." While at the same time, there would be another voice echoing back: "You petty nationalists, vulgar and unreasonable white men, you anti-human Bolsheviks who prefer to fight for power rather than for profit."

Yes, at times like these, there always appears in my mind Pan Xiao's face, purposely not wearing any make-up in the interview, looking straight into the camera and refusing to talk about her widely-praised novel *Humbled as the world*. She also published other novels such as *Ruthless Manzhouli* and *The Stand-in Actor for Hokkaido*, which leaned towards documentary writing, but at a time when reader consumerism leaned towards



2. Ms. Pan is pronounced as Pan XiaoJie, 潘小姐, in Chinese.

North Asia Literature, these novels were not as well-received. I once asked her, why didn't she write like she did before? She replied, "Authors don't work for a masterpiece, they work for a career..." I knew that she has developed a certain level of friendship with Jiang Lu, which had broken up quite soon after the pandemic. We could somehow foresee this to happen, as their friendship only existed at moments when the previously-mentioned two voices intertwined. We really hoped wholeheartedly that the intertwining moment seemed permanent and long-lasting,

but now we find that the conflict held within is the norm that lasted longer. How were Jiang Lu, who has "no friends", and Pan Xiao, who is full of sorrow, able to empathize with each other from the start? How were they able to share openly? What was the basis for this short-lived friendship? Was it due to their critical spirit persistently preserved in this consumerist world? When did the devil divide my friends? Why was I absent at the moment of their conflict? If the critical spirit was incarnated as an Evil Spirit, when would the Holy Spirit descend in between them?



Standing in the Haze

In the Age of the Plague
there was a spoon stirring,
Dropped into the jar of salt and pepper,
the star did not fall because of this,
a sneeze in vain.

Luckily, there was a 1984-made screwdriver,
It was a friend's pinky finger,
dipped in vinegar, wrote down a line of words,
without beginning or end.

--Yes, I'm still writing!

I still kept the messages that Li Yuan sent me before. We used to forward each other poems that have just been published, but we rarely shared any critical views of each other's works. Thinking about it, it has indeed been a long while since I last saw Li Yuan. Even though we share some memories of the student times, there are still many things I find difficult to tell him. However, I still believe that as we are both capable of self-criticism, perhaps we should keep a certain distance apart so that the bad habits of old-school literati do not diffuse into our daily lives. I really want to talk with Li Yuan about topics relating to Jesus and religious beliefs, which we have never discussed before. The biblical rhetoric underlies faintly in our writing, but I am not so sure if voicing it out loud is a kind of stupid and barren symbolism, or if it is just a fear of being identified by Da Lei and Jiang Lu as catering to the subject of colonialism, or if talking about the matter itself will be ridiculed as a kind of de-subjective metaphysics.

"The rhetorical structure of the poem itself is not to be extrapolated,"; "the bad elements in the troop can only unite temporarily." These are the relatively direct comments I received recently, although they are just a few short lines, I can still probably guess where the logic of this banter comes from. These were retold to me by Xu Min, I do not know if he cut off anything but I know that it is the argument of a senior poet from the circle who commented on my practice. The comment was rather ridiculous and filled with cheap politicizing. Xu Min reminded me not to take it

personally. I did not though, but I kept thinking where is the so-called "troop" that he mentioned? When did a community, or a small group that I did not know about emerge among the writers in Beijing, Shanghai, or Northeast China? Or was it the circle of those who write in simplified Chinese? Or a group of drunken allies who like to drink baijiu? All of it seemed absurd so I asked Xu Min if I was out of touch or drifted too far from the poetry circle. Xu Min stressed to me again, "Don't fucking care, it's the limited point of view of their generation, our language environment is ever-changing, they are the ones who drifted away from the original intention of poetry writing, not you." Xu Min is really a good companion to get support from. After hearing about this, Lao Gao laughed it off and only dropped the word "hypocrite". I do not like to call people hypocritical because it is part of humanity, and splitting of the self should be the norm of modern people. This state of a split self is observable in Li Yuan, Pan Xiao and Jiang Lu. Lao Gao, however, would not admit the fact that he does it too. Perhaps in terms of creative form, he tried to maintain a consistent style of writing throughout his work, but if you look closely into his life you would know, the state of splitting is not easily concealed.

Xu Min is a good person, it is not easy to be a good person, even though he himself describes himself as eclectic, but I don't think certain kinds of eclecticism should be nailed to a pillar of shame, moreover, Xu Min's eclecticism is not a kind of cunning in-betweenness, perhaps his friends around him have fallen into a more disconcerting and radical context over the years, and the reflection of his surrounding people is always haunting Xu Min.



This is what I said to Xu Min—We have to face the dislocation of thoughts while being vigilant toward the so-called synchronized will. I could feel Xu Min's solitude, which was not brought about by the people around him, but by his own choice. How would someone who holds the perspective of the gaze have so many companions? But being eclectic is Xu Min's way of solving problems by taking an indirect path. But under the frustration of layers of socio-political reality, it is not so bad to take a banana kick and elegantly bypass the high wall of the system and so returning to literature itself is not as intolerable.

Xu Min reminds me of Chang Xun, he is a middle-aged pastor in our church, he has been writing novels when he is not serving full-time, and we have had several in-depth conversations which were rather impressive. In an essay I once wrote about him, "He exclaimed in a dream, lightning struck the Holy Spirit behind him, yes, it's time to go! Get into the wilderness and open the world we know with the golden key transformed by the white dove... In the spring of 1997, the Reformed Presbyterian Church sent him to a witchcraft

village where no one wanted to preach..." As far as I know, he has been preaching in the northeast, and in his sermons, he has talked a lot about how he sees the shamans and the history of shamans in the northeast region. As he has a foundation in historical research, he obviously knows how to talk about theology and modern history in a more balanced way. I liked his multidimensional interpretation of the sermon message, and he didn't argue anything when many Three-Self Churches came to denigrate his theology as heretical. I have read his sermon draft namely "Ten Letters", which is clear in meaning, but its spiritual interpretation goes beyond the intellectual level, and somehow I often associate him with Xu Min. Although Xu Min does not exclude me from talking about the influence of these religious elements on my poetry, every time when I mention anything about it, he will kindly let the topic slip by, or he will say, "You have your own understanding, but in my understanding, it is the object of your creation, but not the subject." To be honest, every time when we talk about this topic, I am not really sure what he is actually expressing. I know that there will always be intended meanings in creative works that we cannot force



ourselves to understand, which is why even if Xu Min and I have in-depth exchanges about our creations, we have never formed a community for each other's practice. And I do not think that in today's writing environment, anyone would still believe a community of practice ever exists. Of course, as Lao Gao said, "Group politics is originally temporarily organized, and it often collapses quickly and in the end won't it always turn into internal strifes?" On the contrary, "seeking the cause in oneself" has always been criticized as a petty bourgeois literary and artistic tendency, but people like Lao Gao have also made a choice based on their instinctive sense of reality. A person as leftist as Da Lei also had to keep everything

to himself. I really don't know how Da Lei lived through the pandemic, this kind of person who values writing more than life, who will offer him the work of ghostwriting during that time? But Da Lei and Jiang Lu yearned for a community, but only people like them are still waiting for a community, they can never get rid of their political nature. Facing demands like this, what they look forward to in the future is but a process of waiting for the advent of the Messiah, so that I always think, in this kind of anticipation, who is more like that bourgeoisie in ideology? Isn't this a kind of declining Bolshevik aristocracy, but I can't say that, because other than them, the rest of the field seemed worse.

A little preaching makes one refuse ups and downs?
A declining fantasy,
Walking in the demolition team in the north of Zhabei,
Sniffing around for the latest news of war.

The streets only stood the telephone poles in the
Southeastern corner,
Printed with strings of numbers out of the service area,
and people in the past nestled their heads,
humming Hokkien ditties,
while spitting on passing vendors.

And they are the ones who can speak Chinese,
the future generation without an accent,
needless of a signifier, they tailor the rhetorics,
in other words, how they wander is how they go into exile.

Maybe we need Jiang Lu on our side, such a person with a middle-parted hairstyle, a dull face, and who speaks with a Beijing accent. But he doesn't need me at this moment, an old human being who can only engage in bourgeois muttering and seek God's protection. If Xu Min knows that I think like this, he will say that I am being shameless again by saying, "You know I did not say so." Xu Min can also feel that he is having more friends who have twisted minds, he is the one who can pull you out of the inexplicably tangled emotions from all sorts of conversation, so I say, he is more like a warm-hearted preacher. But some people

can't be pulled out, all words of advice are in vain! Yes, so either you don't suggest anything, or you simply say "It's fine". I always say "It's fine" to Lao Gao, but Lao Gao can smell the subtext in it, which shows that his instinctive physical experience is still relevant – "Tell me honestly, what do you mean by 'fine'?" It is rare to find a second Shanghainese man who speaks this way like Lao Gao. "It's fine" does not mean how bad it is, nor how wonderful it is, anyway, it is a kind of laziness of explanation, how do I put this across in words? If there really is a so-called creative community, it may be the glass-hearted³ community, how can

3. "Glass-hearted" 玻璃心 is a popular term in Chinese describing those who are and easily broken-hearted.



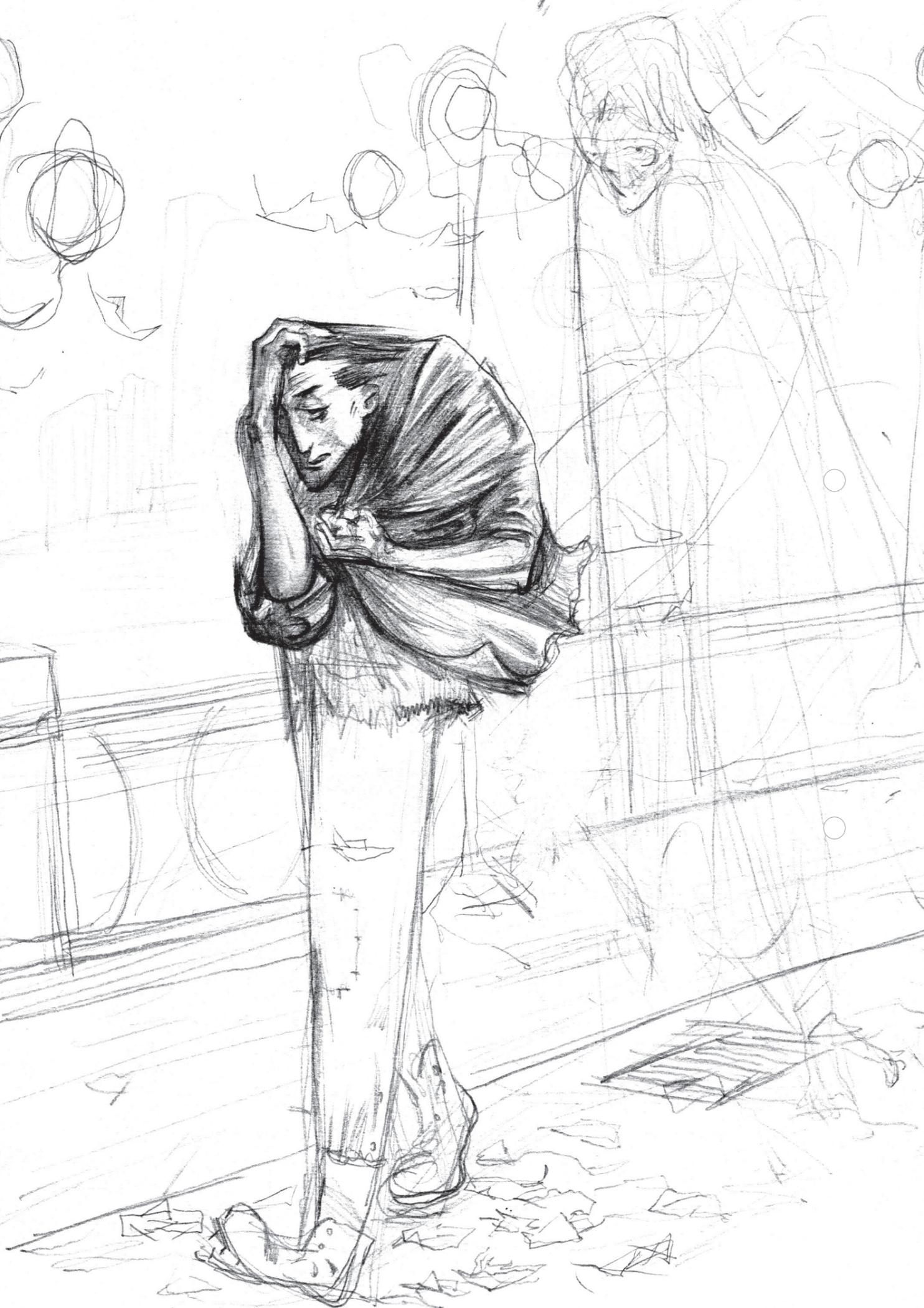
one be strong if he values his creations so dearly? Xu Min once said that there is a community called the translation community, that is, to take over the translation work together. Anyway, in China, you always need translation, even if you use artificial intelligence to go through it first, you still need someone to proofread it, which can save a lot of time, but also ruthlessly foretells those who are proficient in foreign languages that in the future will be easily replaceable.

Lines from the movie *Cross Street*:

"Xiao Xu, don't be sad, don't you still have translation works to do? Translation is also work! How is translation not work?"

Lao Gao's English is very poor, but despite that he has also gone to South America to communicate with Latin poets, I really don't know they communicate, but they probably don't communicate about writing. As humorous as Lao Gao is, he should be able to hold his own, but if Pan Xiao was there too, she would be the person sitting in the

corner, pretending to be silent. Did he sense that look in Pan Xiao's eyes? When I went to Beijing last summer, I invited Pan Xiao for a walk in the park, calling it a park, but in fact, it was a new riverside trail built by Beijing developers in recent years, and this kind of riverside trail also began to be renovated in Shanghai in the early years. When I first went to Beijing, I lived in Xinyuanli, near the Liangma River, where along the river I could still smell bursts of putrefaction, especially after a torrential rain. The smell of rot would spread everywhere and in the summer, when there were more mosquitoes, I would bring along the repellent, stand on a broken stone pier and watch the old man across the river patting the willow tree hard. Now Pan Xiao no longer asks me why I left Beijing, but instead, she asks if I plan to leave the country. Well, when will I leave? Where to? This is not just what Pan Xiao would say, but I always feel that talking about migration is a pedantic middle-class topic, could it be that five or ten years ago, we did not foresee today's reality? Or maybe this reality has already become a global situation, no, Pan Xiao doesn't think so, but what can our Chinese writings do when traveling abroad? For so many years, we have strived to put aside the superficial topic of identity politics and



write based on the historical Chinese context. So what is the point if we go abroad? We are already marginalized, why wouldn't we become more marginalized? It's already so unbearable, how can it be better? Xu Min once said that he hopes for a world without a center or edges, and his essay "Together as Stars" has given me much inspiration using an open view of history to explain our historical situation, the past is no longer a linear

sequence, nor a multilinear disordered combination, but a parallel time and space outside the context of modernity, which constantly beckons us to form a new relationship with it, but Jiang Lu feels that Xu Min's statement is a kind of implicit historical nihilism, and he has always pursued and adhered to the firm stand of returning to modernity.

Go as far as you can,
Do not look back,
Because the planet is orbiting towards
the ripped open cut of a mother's belly,
Run, and never look back.

In Masereel's city,
There lived 200 pounds of Bolsheviks,
As you weigh lighter than standard,
You don't deserve the moonlight to wash over,
The silhouettes swept across by morning catkins.

It's just that, they have made a pact.
To go as far as they can.

He and I are old humans,
who liked to adorn the irrelevant details with
layers of coverings
With no one appointed, the subjects well-attended,
Because the objective world was stolen by crows,
Was in turmoil,
And fell into a rat's hole we couldn't get into with our hands,
and you chuckled, that we still had our bodies,
but how could we have 200 pounds of slimness
With a hairline sharp and mean?
Luckily, it was not that long a distance.

So, they couldn't hear the will from afar,
but shout as loudly as they can, go as far as you can.

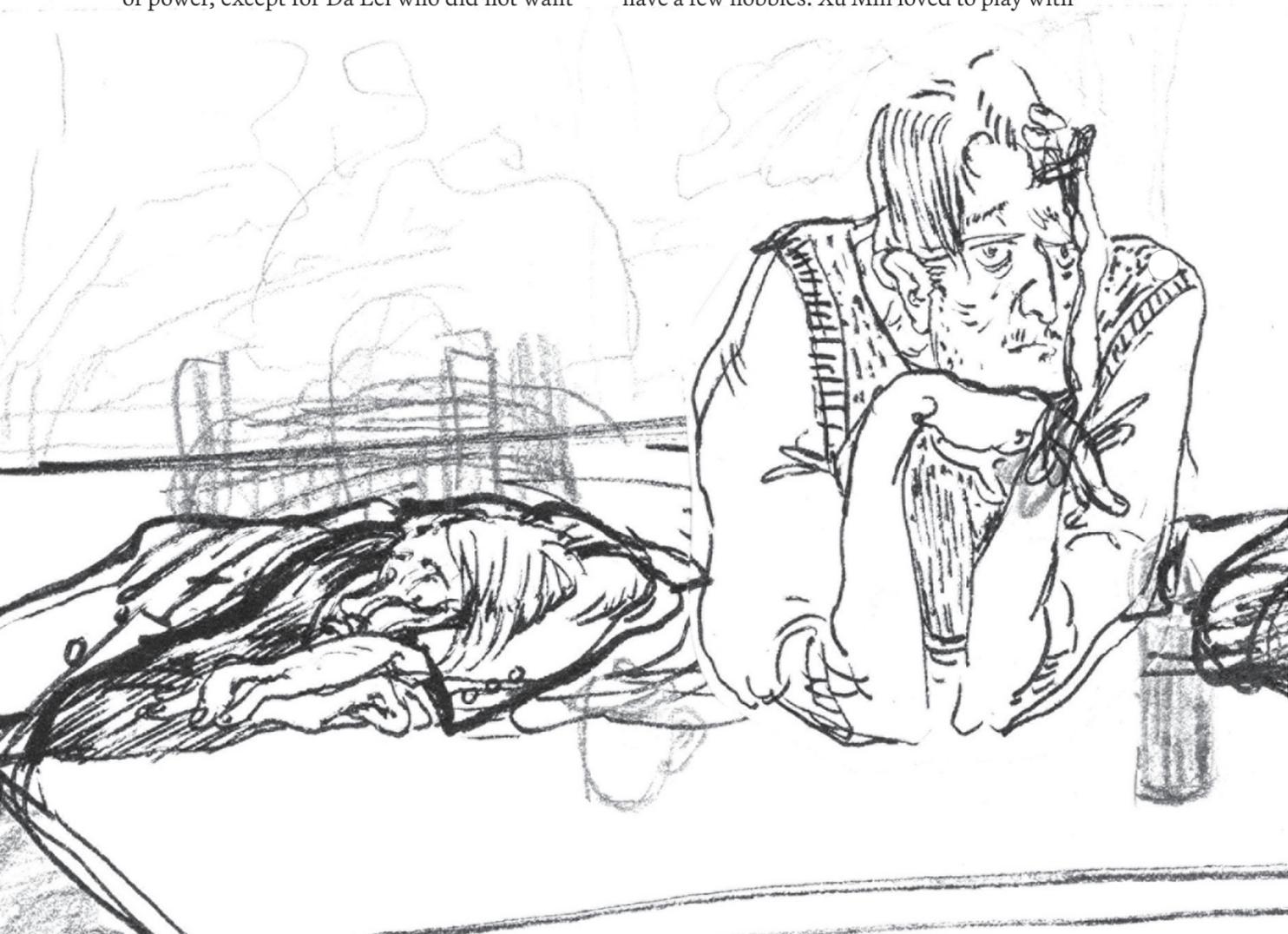
I would never talk to Lao Gao about such topics as migration, for him, it was good enough to survive on the relocation fee of his old residence. He would always enjoy sharing with me the few overseas experiences that he had: In addition to South America, he also dated an installation artist in Lithuania, visited a left-wing leader of the former Yugoslavia in Serbia, and participated in an avant-garde poetry and art festival organized by a few sound artists in Ho Chi Minh

City. This reminded me of what Pan Xiao once said, that the vulgarity and pretentiousness of middle-aged men are directly proportional to their body weight. In fact, I would still advise him to exercise properly, but he did not even know how to cook for himself, and he had to rely on food deliveries every day even though he was poverty-stricken – as if cooking would ease away his poetic essence of integrating the world. Of course, I knew what kind of man he used to be.

Browsing the academic forums around the millennium years, these people all thought that they were so elegant, so creative, and so intolerably self-absorbed. You can tell from the disturbing photos that they uploaded onto online platforms and blogs, and the ridiculously pretentious nicknames they used, such as “tricky tongue, frontier, forty months, wide river, weak water...”

Of course, there were also those who used their real names, they were the older ones... Da Lei always said, “Don’t fucking reminisce, don’t say it was better 10 years ago. Was it good 10 years ago? When was it ever good?” As Da Lei looked older than his actual age, plus the fact that I heard all sorts of stories about him since I was a student, I always thought he was a writer who had lived through the 90s, he would wake me up from my illusions by saying things like “The 90s weren’t good either!” And “It had never been good!” I don’t know why he always described himself as a stray dog, but by saying so, he did make a certain moral gap between himself and his contemporaries, who all had their own little circles of power, except for Da Lei who did not want

to compete for rights of speech in those circles. Just like how Xu Min described Da Lei, he was indeed an intellectual and became more amiable as he aged. Of course, he is an amiable person, but do not make me start on his reportage again, which I know that Xu Min can accept as he had always been open-minded, even so, however, he still agreed on the fact that we should not live our lives like Da Lei. Nonetheless, Xu Min was a person who sees things more comprehensively than I do, as I did not peruse Da Lei’s earlier works. But thinking about it today, what were his contemporaries doing back then? Obviously, his works were not properly viewed by his contemporaries, and while Da Lei said that he did not expect any positive comments even if they read my works, it is easy to see that his stubbornness is reflected in his writing today, as if saying: “I am different from you, I will not let you understand me, and I do not let you consume me.” I thought Jiang Lu would appreciate this kind of stubbornness, but even Jiang Lu said, “Can’t he just embellish it properly?” I had never been to Jiang Lu’s place, but I only knew that he liked listening to classical music. Speaking about which, it is important to have a few hobbies. Xu Min loved to play with



cameras, Pan Xiao loved 50s jazz music, and Lao Gao loved to play with contemporary artists, especially those engaged in sound experiments. God knows if he has received any signal from space telling him to use a single word, or just a verb in some lines of his poems. Once I observed that he used eight verbs consecutively in eight lines, and I was at the edge of swearing.

It is a good thing to create without expectation, but it is not to say that you do not expect anything, just that you do not expect responses from your surroundings when you create. Li Yuan once said, “There are no others in my writing.” How could he have such an awareness so early? When he said it we were only graduating from school, inexperienced of lively matters or to conform to social rules. Was it because of the fact that we

were young? It might seem a little pretentious to say, that the younger poets or writers I met had just started writing small novels, and when the epidemic began, many of them were returning from abroad, in a hurry, not knowing where they were going, and looking full of expectation and disdain at the same time. I did not dare to say something like “don’t expect anything” to them, or else it would make me sound old and boring, and besides, they did not bother with things like the historical context of literature... I heard some people talking about the word “roaming” the other day, a rather neutral word that has neither positive nor negative connotations, and perhaps it would gradually replace the word “wandering” which I am used to overusing. Well, these people of the future, Actually, they are fine I guess, I just don’t have the desire to go on anymore.



Whether people of old or new,
along the shores of any river,
in the quartz and weed-guarded insect world,
there are always 44,000 hertz,
prepositions, verbs, adjectives,
and nouns we've never heard before,
Who is the subject and who becomes the object,
a stereo speaker surrounded by quotation marks,
though not channel 5.1,
as long as Bluetooth is connected,
It can always be heard,
The godly sorrow.

You used to point out
that it is a movement no longer in the image,
But humbled as a body of flesh,
It walks on the river's surface still.
I can recognize the reflection,
It always indicates to me
That it is recorded on the watchtower on top of the city wall,
that eyes should be closed for twenty-four hours,
and not restrain from trembling lips.

So that you can tell apart
Earthly sorrow and godly sorrow.



THE MOST ABSTRACT PARAGRAPHS

Screenplay by
Li Ran

Shanghai

The psychological time of the two characters isn't limited to the 1940s or the early days of the People's Republic, but has parallels with the period from the 1980s to today.

"We've spoken about this before" and "When you're no longer on this earth, it doesn't matter anymore" are neither the beginning nor the end of the conversation: the two characters are in a suspended state, in a predicament common to modern intellectuals. Character A is slightly more introverted than Character B, but his words are not without hidden meaning; Character B is more frank and likes to speak his mind. As they speak their lines, the two characters shift roles, almost merging into one another. They're two intellectuals adrift, and they find in their friendship with one another a source of comfort and warmth.

A

But we've spoken about this before, haven't we? And here you are, still going on – see how you won't let it drop? As if by railing against those Saturday Sentimentalists you could get back your lost youth.

B

Saturday Sentimentalists, ha! But you're the one who brought up those hacks, so clearly it's you who won't let them drop. Let me tell you, I've got a thing or two to say about this friendship of ours. If I don't speak, who will? Old Zhou? Big Xu? Their old-fashioned talents burned out long ago.

A

Burned out? Those are your words – I've never said anything so harsh. Actually Old Zhou had me over for a drink just last week.

B

Ah yes, we must not bite the hand that pours the drink. I can see you have a grasp of our situation, so why start crossing red lines?

B Reaches out to pour a glass of water and does other small actions, not looking at A, intentionally facing the other direction. B gets straight to the point and talks about political "red lines."

As close friends, the two enjoy needling each other, but behind their sharp words is genuine affection. The "Saturday Sentimentalists" is a reference to the writers of *The Saturday*, a journal associated with the school of romantic or escapist fiction known as "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies," which the liberal left in the early 20th century criticized as right-wing.

A

(Drinks tea, sighs, stares downcast into the distance.)

B

You know what I'm talking about. Others may not, but I do. So you miss the old Antiquarians? Haven't lingered long enough in Ten Mile West Club?

B's body language is expressive. When he reaches the words "Old Shanghai" and "stir up the scallion oil," the actor should gesticulate with his hands or a fan.

A

Don't be ridiculous. New times call for new concepts.

B

Things are loosening, but it's only temporary... This is what the South has always been like. You think you're in the clear, when really you're just getting started. You take the bowl of noodles and stir up the scallion oil, and before long there's not a dry noodle left.

A

This is different. I'm not so frivolous, and what I write isn't just light reading. And it's definitely not for the compradors.

A thinks to himself, What are you up to, trying to sound me out like this?

"The new times" refer indistinctly to the era of New Democracy envisioned by Mao in the 1940s and 1950s and to the period after the Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art – but perhaps also to the period after the Cultural Revolution, or to the "New Era" of today.

B

Well, you don't have the class background for the compradors. At first we were a little dogmatic, it's true, but you need to have a standpoint. Without a standpoint, what can you do? Start with "Once upon a time," and end with "The adventure continues in the next chapter"?

A

(Laughs to himself.)

B

What I mean is, forget about whether or not there really are scholars and beauties. And don't misunderstand me (points to A): what I'm against is empty mediocrity.

A

(Frowns.)

A is a bit nervous.

B

I don't mean you, but I see danger for Big Xu, with his heap of clichés. It's tabloid writing under a new guise.

B starts to become more conciliatory.

They're sarcastic because they're close. Still, they're slightly nervous when bringing up each other's artistic shortcomings. They're also trying to avoid exposing their own.

A

Big Xu? But he was already in that world – he used to be a follower of Zhang Henshui. Maybe others don't remember, but I do. Old Zhou came over first, helping hide people for the League of Left-Wing Writers. Always in a frenzy, that one. As for his style, Old Zhou doesn't have the foundation that Henshui did. Even then Big Xu and the rest weren't exactly the younger generation, and they all did hack work for politicians, more or less.

B

Right, even today they're essentially the same: they've spent their lives writing "tales of romance" and "tales of intrigue." They've got a whole toolkit for smearing others. Big Xu dodged the anti-bourgeois wave because he's a bad writer. If he'd been a good writer he wouldn't be alive today.

They relax a bit once they start talking about others. They have an intellectual's sour tendency to find fault in others.

When A mentions reactionary figures like Zhang Henshui, the tone should be delicate, indicating that these are "sensitive" words.

A

He lived larger than we did. To tell the truth, Old Lin's wuxia martial arts stories weren't half-bad.

B

What made you think of him again? Those wuxia writers had a formula too.

A

As if we didn't have a formula! You think you're still so mighty, now that there's another assault on reactionary writing? Has there been any visible progress in these last few decades? You can't say there's been none at all: life is different, the revolution happened.

The "assault on reactionary writing" refers to the leftist fight against the Mandarin Duck school. When A says this, he has an air of triumph; at the same time, it's a way of explaining himself. At the same time it's a self-explanation.

B

Excuse me? The revolution is still very much happening, comrade! It's still I-N-G. Or haven't you heard? Damn it, remember when you were in a lane house on Changle Road reading Jiao Mu, *The Worker's Tale*, bawling your eyes out? Let me tell you, back then I was already reading Gong Shaoqin, and I felt like "Mr. Dry Eyes" looking at the worker Li Dafa.

B always understands more than A. In fact, B too was once naive, but past hardship has given him a more worldly air.

A

You mean Li Zifa.

B

Oh, whatever. Who cares what kind of Fa he was? But you need more than just sighs and sympathy.

A

You're one to talk! Who ran into the theater once, just before the curtain fell, indignantly yelling, "New Drama isn't new! Old Drama isn't old!"? Didn't you lift that from the novel *Officialdom Unmasked*?

B

(Laughs. Then, in an old-fashioned, stagey voice:) "From the boiling heights to the frigid depths."

A

Crazy bastard, who could tell what you were yelling.

B

Anyway, in terms of political consciousness, I took the first step, unlike those "revolutionary" opportunists.

A

(Pauses before speaking.) Actually, in those days, I drew the line at writing anything lewd. That was my personal "red line." If they think sentimentality is just a cold-blooded product, then you haven't properly understood what writing is.

A also took part in the movement, so he's no less knowledgeable than B – he's just more idealistic in his thinking and is always stressing creative "red lines" as a matter of personal integrity.

A is a depressive with a bit of sour disposition. He's pained by his failure to

achieve his ambitions, and by his own hesitation to take political standpoint: he remains caught between the two sides.

B

Ah, what to do? Weary of the world at your ripe old age. Why not print the word "Individualist" in red characters on your vest? I won't follow your lead. If you run into trouble, have the nice policeman haul you off to Zhaojiabang Road and hang you out to dry like a piece of salted fish.

(A says nothing, takes a drink of water, looks at the scenery outside the window. He's a little annoyed.)

B immediately realizes that A is reversing his judgment of the Mandarin Duck school and has revisionist thoughts.

A

You're a lumpen lurking in the revolutionary ranks.

A starts to strike back.

B

(Laughs.) How long have you been saving up those words, just waiting to let them out? All right, let's not send you to the police then. I'll handcuff myself and march to the station and say I want to confess. When they ask me what my crime is, I'll say, "I'm the Saturday reader you've been looking for." And then I'll add, in my best classical Chinese: "Many are the pleasures of a Saturday afternoon! The people go not to the theater for songs, nor to winehouse for drink, nor to the brothel for smiles, but turn, cheerless and alone, to the jailhouse to read Gorky's *The Stormy Petrel*. Is that not a modest joy?"

B doesn't care, of course, and knows that A has a stubbornness all his own. The line identified as classical Chinese is adapted from a text advertising *The Saturday*.

Only now does A join in B's mood and start to laugh.

B is thinking, You're human too, hiding your lewd books, and you take the moral high ground with me?

A

Oh dear. If it's death you seek, you can leap from this very balcony: flip yourself like a milk cap and splatter onto the ground below. Under your body I'll slip the copy of *Studying Abroad in the East* that I keep stashed away in my closet, as a footnote to your strange behavior.

A is completely relaxed, no longer tense.

B

(Laughs.) That would be your revenge for the salted fish, then. But let's see that copy of *Studying Abroad in the East* – hurry up, hand it over.

A

(Makes a face.)

Here their standpoints have changed somewhat. A and B share a common fate and find comfort in sparring with each other. Even as they argue with a straight face, they're laughing on the inside.

B

What was that about a red line, not writing anything any lewd? I want to see which page is all wrinkled, which one you've made a mess of. Come one, out with it.

A

You really believe I have a copy, just because I said so? Anyway you won't see it in this life.

B

What's that, comrade? You want me to make a ghost of me before I can pay homage to the author, the dear Mr. Pingjiang?

A

Restrain yourself, comrade. A moment ago you said the revolution was still I-N-G, and now you've turned into a dirty old man, making a last stand against our proletarian literature. I've got a mystery here, *Seven Swords and Thirteen Heroes*. If you like I'll get it out, and throw in two dry batteries you can stick in that old flashlight of yours.

B

I see, so it was mysteries. In that case why don't I recommend one to you? *The Tilting Doll*.

A

That's for me? I thought it was for Old Zhou and Big Xu. No, no, I could never accept such a gift.

B

Nonsense. In any case, with your hedonism, you keep straying further away from the realist path. I suggest you write poetry, and not New Verse, but something in the old style. Yes, poetry might be just the thing – you could rouse the Crescent Moon Society with your words. And if that doesn't work out, try translation. Translation's safe.

These two sections are rather long. They're also the dramatic moments when the two are showing off their talents.

A

Safe? Hardly.

B

No, I don't mean literary translation, I mean farm equipment instruction manuals, that sort of thing, chugga chugga chugga. That way no one will know if you belong to some old-fashioned school.

A

Clearly, a copy of Mr. Pingjiang's book under your mangled corpse won't be enough. You're drooling – back in those years you were still

beating drums and gongs, calling for a spiritual rebirth. Your reactionary nature is corrosive and undermines the revolution. Day after day, you claim the moral high ground with your veiled critiques, puffed up with righteous indignation. You look just like an activist. You know, you should try drama, be a guest lecturer. After all, you too used to be a big name on the stage. You even once played Wang Erxiao – in Shanghainese, no less! Incredible!

Spurred on by B's glib words, A reveals a certain Old Shanghai pride.

By contrast, B has now begun to take a softer tone, even though his words are still barbed.

B

Goodness, your memory is prodigious! Gives me goosebumps, hearing you drag out the past like that. Speaking of Wang Erxiao, there's an asylum in Jiading where every Saturday they organize the patients, men and women, to sing in a chorus, and the song they sing is "Wang Erxiao Put the Cows to Pasture." (Laughs.) That choir of theirs has a name – it's called the Freudian Singers. If nothing else, you can always go there and volunteer to blow up balloons. When you've got nothing else to do, gather up your bitterness and blow it into little red and green balloons, until you're all out of breath. It's easy, and once you've purged your bile, your mind will be at peace, and you won't pick up your Parker pen and make reckless insinuations, saying the old woman from the neighborhood committee owes you money.

A

Is there anything you don't know? Who do you work for? What are you, an American lackey or a Soviet stooge? If you're a spy, then my conspiracy theory was right. If you're a comrade, then don't play around with criticism. (Pauses, then says to himself with a smirk:) When you at work, you drank tea and played chess with those muckraking reporters. Wasn't that fun? And here we are still talking about clinging to the old world or ushering in the new. You're behind the times.

A can't quite keep up and starts to turn serious.

B

Back then the worst thing you could be called was a "word gremlin," it meant you were a bastard. Careful they don't say you're working to restore the old order. (Gesticulates)

B sees that A is serious and leaves to go to the bathroom, so that A can cool off.

A

Who said anything about restoration? You'd better watch your words. And now you're changing again? What gossip's made you tighten your belt? You used to be the revisionist, not me. I can see you've still got an elitist mind: in your bones you still hate the riff-raff. Even today you're against the people. You thought you had a knack for wearing hats – you thought only you could tell which was long or short, which was fat or skinny? I know you mean well, but with that mouth of yours, if you do run into trouble, it'll be something you said, not necessarily something you wrote. Even if I think the same things as you, I say little. I have to write, I have to research – I can't just get by with word games.

B

(Laughs.) If you'll excuse me, I'm going to use the facilities.

A

No. 1 or no. 2? Need me to grab you an issue of *The Young Companion*?

B

(Disdainful.) Hmph.

B gets up and leaves, while A sits quietly alone. The camera films A, while in the background B can be heard urinating. When B is almost finished, he is stirred to recite a poem. The camera remains fixed on A.

Sitting there in silence, A seems to be thinking: One has to have a red line.

B
(Recites:)

In this section it's mostly A in the frame. B is just an off-screen voice.

B
Since I first donned the heavens, and sprawled across the vastness,

A crown of glory gleaming from my brow,

As mountain peaks looked up in silent reverence,

Who now can count the many years that passed

Before your world of mortals, came spinning 'neath my feet?

Long have I walked the corners of the earth

And plunged into the waves of day and night...

A Coughs and interrupts B. B reenters the frame.

A: All right, that's enough. It's like Sun Dayu is here in the flesh. You just sit here and sprawl across the vastness for a minute, I'll be right back.

A leaves the frame. The camera focuses on B, while A can be heard urinating in the background.

A sees B urinating, stands up and looks hesitantly out from the balcony. As B recites the poem, A laughs to himself, thinking: You're even more decadent (reckless) than I am! Reciting poetry by the Crescent Moon Society [also criticized by the left], and then getting on my case! It just goes to show...

B reenters the frame, sees that A has to go to the bathroom, and also goes to the balcony. He looks out onto the garden with his back to the camera, with an air of unconcern.

A walks back in, sees the chaise longue to one side, and stretches out on it.

B is no longer looking out from the balcony and turns to face A.

B
Even the New Verse was new at one point. New classes need new forms, but what are the classes today? What do they need? Can you say? (Pauses) You know, this place we're staying isn't so bad. We have a balcony to sit on, and a garden fenced off to keep ordinary people out. Sigh. (Slaps his thigh.) I ... I was thinking of a teacher of mine - I think his name was Zhao? In those days he acted on stage, doing "New Drama" at the Empress Theater. Once I saw him in Under the Roofs of Shanghai. An impressive man, but not very adaptable, and his emotions often got the better of him. Anyway, in the end, anyone can be brought low. And he was actually pretty smart. But that's fate...

This is a turning point. The rhythm gradually deepens. After B returns from the bathroom, he brings up the subject of political standpoints.

A is clearly not used to the subject and goes on teasing.

A
(Laughs.) Oh my! I've found a romantic fatalist lurking in the revolutionary ranks. Clearly the holdovers of feudal society remain unbowed. And you have the nerve to criticize me? That "donned the heavens and sprawled across the vastness" of yours has really given me some inspiration.

B
I think it was the waft of piss that gave you inspiration.

A
Why not both? Actually I was reminded of *Where to Run*, by Xu Zhuodai.

B
You're still faithful to your Saturday Sentimentalists.

A
Can we be critical? He's a little better than Zhang Henshui, I'd say.

B begins to grow more serious.

B
In terms of content, I have to admit, he's got more substance. There's some life experience, especially in *Where to Run* ... As for critique, it comes down to class standpoint. In politics these people were a lost cause. Where would they be today? After the incident... we got pretty lucky. A hormonal camp led you to cry out, urged you to write. There were comrades all around, but you managed to hide through it all.

A gradually joins in and speaks openly about their shared social predicament.

A
So after all these years, you and I are still running away. But Xu Zhuodai didn't know where to run, and neither did Zhang Henshui. (In the righteous voice of a radio announcer:) "It's the petty bourgeoisie that yearns for 'immortality,' a blend of old feudal consciousness and bourgeois consciousness." (Returns to his normal voice:) It's just like noodles in scallion oil – mix them together and you can't tell them apart. But in the end we're that "Mr. Xiong" he wrote about.

B
Everything else is just daydreams and fantasies. So you should think twice before picking up a tear-jerker novel: they're the fiction equivalent of New Drama. It's death by a thousand cuts, the stinking intellectuals sent down to the 18th level of hell. God damn it all.

A
That's a red line too. You used to swear quite a bit. Do you still?

B
Try me again and I will.

A
You've got a double standard, then! Though I have noticed you seem to have divided loyalties.

B
(Laughs quietly.) Not as divided as you. You were helping Old Xia back then when a few big shots raised a stink. And then when a few of the mandarin ducks were strapped for cash, you sent them a life line. You were storing up favors on both sides like Lord Mengchang of old, haha. You kept lewd books by Mr. Pingjiang in your closet, and by day you wrote dazibao. So don't be so quick to call others divided! (Pauses.) It doesn't matter if you're an apparatchik toeing the line or a weepy nostalgic petty bourgeois – it's all the same goddamned thing.

A
Don't be so negative. You're such a nihilist! In the end it all comes down to fate, but there's no point in talking about the end. This is a kind of the end of history values. Problems need to be analyzed; you're perfectly capable of analysis. Back in those years I really admired you: when everyone else fell into line, you stood up and argued that even writers denounced as "cancers" could be admired for their use of language – it represented progress, compared to the old times and the old styles. If I'm not misremembering, you argued that, in both technique and structure, *Fate in Tears and Laughter* was not without merit.

B's anger starts to well up at "stinking intellectuals." He seems to be speaking about someone else, but actually he's talking about himself.

B
"Not without merit" counts as an argument?

A tries to expose B.

A
Well, back then we called that a rational analysis of art. Whereas today people have the gall to write reviews of things they haven't read. (Impotent voice:) "There's no need to read these things, you can tell they're dreck just by flipping through them."

B thinks, You're no different, and you want to get all high and mighty? Spare me.

B
Haha, I know who you're referring to. Is that person still alive?

A
Who knows, who cares? It's of no concern to us. Yet these kinds of people are everywhere nowadays—they just can't say things like "you can tell just by flipping through them."

B
It's arrogance. The revolution gave people confidence. I bet even now they're off in some corner, plotting against each other.

These words show how the two are caught between the left-wing Maoist thought of the Yan'an Talks and a fondness for "decadent bourgeois literature." Vacillating between left and right, they don't fit in on either side.

A
No need to speculate ... (Laughs.) One day you can look into the story and write an exposé.

B
You must be joking! People like that aren't worthy of an exposé. If I did write one, I'd just be writing what everyone already knew. I can't think of that one fellow's full name anymore.

A
With all their endless criticism, those people just wind up peddling clichés. All they've done is trade in their pretty words for the slogans of a new era.

B
Don't say that too loud, especially about Big Xu and his lot, or you'll be done for.

A
Sigh, I'm so tired of all this. Not everything old is bad.

B
Old what? (The conversation falls silent for a moment.)

At this point in the dialogue, the two have entered into a truly serious exchange.

A
(Drinks some water.) Did you ever read *Conversations by the Pond*?

B
(Laughs.) I read some of the *Strange Tales* but found it boring. How is it you're leading such a life of leisure? have you started study the late of Qing Dynasty?

A speaks with an even rhythm and a measured tone.

A
Alas, no. I just felt I had to read it again. I'm old, and I think there are things you really need to read – if you don't, you're doing yourself a disservice. I hear Old Zhou has a rare edition from the late Qing. Before his uncle was killed, he squirreled away some books.

B
What did his uncle do?

A

Not sure, apparently he was an adviser to some official.

B speaks at a faster clip, but before replying he hesitates for a second or two.

B

From the "Jottings" school, then. Master Xia did a whole classification. These people built a theory of literary revolution, and they built themselves into it. What's noxious, what's wholesome – they'll assign you a place, one by one. Naive.

A starts to grow more relaxed and wants to change the subject. Also wanting to slow down, B puts on a blank expression, curious to hear what else A can talk about.

A

Some people really were good, though. Some people had a good heart.

B

Says who? Most people aren't criminals, they're not warlord compradors, they're not traitors. So how bad can they be?

A

You must know who was behind what happened to us.

B

Ah, comrade, there's no sense in talking about that again. It's enough just to know. (Silence. They both say nothing.) The "weapons" certainly weren't shoddy. "Works of art which have no artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically." (Quotations from Mao.)

A

Wow, you've committed it to heart.

B is a little impatient and thinks A is trying to be conciliatory over by talking about good and evil on a moral level, rather than discussing things in depth.

Here B reveals he's read Mao Zedong, stressing the political nature of art and literature. This sudden leftward swerve catches A somewhat off guard.

B

I admire its vision – ultimately it's beyond refute. Perhaps we're doomed to live in the "New Democracy." If we'd gone to Yan'an, maybe we'd be better off, but it wasn't our fate. What can you do?

A

In Yan'an, how to write and what to write were spelled out with perfect clarity. What can you do? Do something more varied, and you sign your own death warrant.

B

If we'd gone to the USSR, things would also be different. (Laughs.) This too is fate. Ours is the bitterest fate of all.

A

Enough, this talk is leading nowhere. My family's from Suzhou, from a village called Hengjin. My grandfather left for school and made it to Shanghai. You too, you're more or less a Shanghai native.

B

I don't mean where we live. People have historical limitations. If we'd gone to the USSR, or even just stayed in Yan'an, we'd belong to the history of a different world. Why do we have to draw lines between factions, arrange them in a hierarchy? Think about it, it's just a way to assign us a place, but why do we need an assigned place?

B admitted that, while he understands the Yan'an Talks, he wasn't in Yan'an himself and isn't enthusiastic about going any deeper.

A feigns ignorance of the matter and wants to move the conversation to another subject.

A
Maybe it would be different if we'd gone to Hong Kong.

B
Do you wish you had? If you'd left, you'd never have met Xiaojun.

A
But she's in the organization, and I'm just an old bachelor. She's out of my league.

B
See? This is exactly the hierarchy I meant. What it comes down to is, is anything we write "practical"?

A
Some people are quick on the uptake, and quick to change.

B
The ones who studied in Japan. They led the way at first, and when the League of Leftist Writers was founded in the 1930s, they came running back.

A
I didn't mean them, but them too, of course... ah.

B
Yes, right – in the end we were the ones who couldn't let go. Fortunately, we all figured that out. Back then everyone pandered, to a certain extent, but the problems were serious. We were fighting against outsiders, even if we were muddled about who they were, and even if they weren't so different from us. But the "bastards" were right there, and the debates all took place in public. Later on, the struggles happened behind closed doors, and even today a lot of people won't talk about them. (Pause.) I

don't think I'm divided – in fact, I think I'm more whole.

B has sunk his teeth in and won't let go, insisting on speaking.

A thinks, If you want to talk, go ahead.

A
No matter how whole you are, you still lack a stage.

B
I suppose. (Pauses.) People will always stumble, and once they get "institutional" assurances... (pauses) then we'll no longer have a chance to breathe.

A
You're overthinking it.

B
Overthinking? You're not under-thinking it?

A
It's just not something I can know. You don't know either.

B
These days it's "depoliticized" minds that are muddled. We're at a turning point.

A
We've been through a lot of turning points. (Silent.)

B
I'm not talking about the May Fourth movement. What I mean is, so far the structural outline of things has only been strengthened. Not weakened.

A
Go on.

At this point, B knows that it makes no difference whether or not he says these words. But he can't help thinking them, and he can't help saying them.

B

Sociopolitical and literature are inseparable – that I don't need to explain. But after victory, there won't be a hundred flowers blooming behind the songs of joy. One voice will gradually become dominant – or rather, it will suddenly become a will to power. The variation can only become a "singularity."

"Later on" refers to after 1949, when the Congress of Writers and Artists purged the left-wing China Federation of Literary and Art Workers, clarifying positions and sorting "right" from "wrong."

A

But there's no need to live in constant fear of a sudden turn for the worse.

B

I know what you mean. But comrade, I hope you're not one of those hormonal optimists.

A

I'm not an optimist. Perhaps I was when I first read *The Worker's Tale*. But during the years of the occupation, I grew out of it.

"So far the structural outline of things has only been strengthened. Not weakened." These words that B says are key: they refer both to today and to the past.

B

Self-knowledge is a first step. Sometimes talking about others and talking about oneself are two different things. In the past, when your average Zhang, Wang, Li, or Zhao came back from overseas, they were sneered at as orphans. But I don't think there's anything wrong with being an orphan. They wanted to go home again, but couldn't. Some of them found an organization

as soon as they returned, some continued to be prodigal sons. They were children of privilege, after all – it's a class limitation.

There were "prodigals" in the 1930s and 1940s, and in today's art circles they're suddenly everywhere, so this is another layer of meaning.

A

I don't think necessarily a matter of class. Among us, some came from well-off, middle-class families, and they still had a high level of political consciousness, not to mention experience, and a bit of land.

B

Yes, they were well-educated. Though not because of their schools, but because they chose good partners.

At this point in the conversation, the two have let down their guard: they're earnest and serious, but trapped by a sense of helplessness.

A

But if you think about it, that's not necessarily a good thing. Most of them had talent. In those years, some of them were in the occupied areas, some of them were in liberated areas. Even if they were all working toward a New Literature, they were like different fruits on the same tree: the ones that got a lot of sun grew sweet, the ones with less sun turned sour.

B

So have you been doing some self-reflection? Which kind are you, the sweet or the sour?

A

That's a question for history to decide.

B

Isn't history written by people? Who would you like to have write it?

A
(Laughs bitterly but says nothing.)

B
Then let me examine myself: I think I may be one of the sour ones. I lived in the occupied zone, and I lacked that optimism. Maybe I am divided, like you said – an “individualist” who’s evolved. (Laughs.) Even today I’m hard to define, so for now I can spend my life chattering.

A
When I mentioned “fate” earlier, I didn’t mean a fiction like fatalism. I meant fate as in “the fates of the two Chinas.”

All the laughter here is good-natured. The sense of “finding comfort” or “huddling together for warmth” is especially noticeable.

B
(Laughs.) Impressive as you are, you need a footnote for such references. (Laughs again.) Keep talking like that and you’ll survive. That’s a “progressive” stance.

A
But it’s just a stance. And as you said before, in today’s circumstances, just having a stance isn’t enough.

B
In that case, might I humbly suggest the gentleman raise his political consciousness? Even the people who draw comics have started to write self-criticisms. Best not to fall behind.

A
There’s a sour note in your words. Do you look down on our dear Mr. Mi?

“Mr. Mi” refers to comic artist Mi Gu. During the Republican period, his comics were mainly satirical and critical, but in 1947 he wrote a self-reflective preface for a collection of his

work, saying things like, “I’m still a liberal, and I welcome criticism from my comrades.”

B
Perish the thought. Mr. Mi was a pioneer, but have you read the preface to his latest work?

A
I have, and he draws a clear line against liberalism. Though I think that even if he dodges New Year’s Day, Lantern Festival will get him. That is to say, sooner or later he’ll fall too.

B
Oh, is that a prophesy? Can the gentleman read the future? Why not read mine?

A
I used to socialize with them, you know. I spent some time at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts. Maybe I really wasn’t cut out for it.

This portion of the dialogue can have a slightly quicker rhythm.

B
Aha, right. Then you must have written some pieces for Modern Sketch and illustrated them yourself, right?

A
Yes, a couple of times, in my youth, when the old man was still around. But I didn’t do any more after that. Maybe my drawings were bad, and they didn’t have the heart to tell me.

B
Maybe your writing wasn’t good enough. (Laughs.)

A
(Laughs but says nothing.)

B

I don't entirely agree with the liberals' view on literature: stripping it of politics or religion means stripping it of ideology. Yet that's where the conflicts are.

A

I completely understand. But if you don't remove yourself from the maelstrom, how can you talk about art itself? I'm not talking about the so-called third way—this is something I've been discussing recently with Zhou and Xu.

B

Oh? What's their attitude?

A

They don't have one.

B

That's impossible.

At the mention of "attitude," things start to become a little more tense.

B reiterates his distaste for "those people." In fact he's a person of temperament.

A

Actually Zhou did mention the "new directions," as they're called, but he couldn't say anything specific. I imagine he was feeling the heat. He's a man with a historical burden, you know.

B

Sounds like you're covering for him. One has to be careful with these "cliques."

A

(Laughs.) He probably thinks we're the ones in a clique.

B

How could we be? Are we like those globetrotters who spent time in England, the US, or France? They all keep close to one another. If huddling together helps them keep warm, well, might as well huddle together. To say that they're a collective couldn't be more true. So Old Zhou and his group have been the targets of "consolidation and expansion."

A

(Laughs.) Maybe some of them really did broaden their horizons, but I bet others just went to have a good time.

B

(Laughs.) Exactly, they probably all went to read *Studying Abroad in the East*.

A

You give them too much credit. Only the best of them do any pleasure reading at all.

B

There's one group really that does have a case of "spiritual syphilis."

A also wants to smooth things over, though he looks more inclined to make peace with himself, so the subject becomes more abstract.

A

(Laughs.) Well, well, looks like you've learned how to attack with words! Weren't you saying that technique and content were two different things? (Laughs again.) That Mr. Yang has truly taken realist fiction to a new level: he's received a "baptism of science," laying bare the psychological mechanisms, with insight from materialism and evolution, in the line of Zola and Maupassant.

B

(Laughs.) Just take a look at those pages. "A peach blossom her face, a willow her waist." For pity's sake!

A
You're too harsh. Why don't you find a girlfriend? Don't be a bachelor forever. You're a bare branch, with no fruit!

B
At my age, I have the wisdom of self knowledge. (Falls silent.) Perhaps things in Chongqing would be fine...

A
Perhaps. When we are no longer on this earth, it doesn't matter anymore. (Laughs bitterly.)

B
(Laughs, resigned, and shakes his head.)

END



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