

張天翼：溫柔製造者

Manufacturer of Tenderness

By Zhang Tianyi

Translated by Stephen L. Smith



Zhang Tianyi in the 1930s

Translator's Introduction

Zhang Tianyi was born in Nanjing in 1906. His father, Zhang Bochun 張伯純, served as education commissioner at Nanjing, and his mother, He Yixiao 何儀孝, was a poet. During Zhang's youth his family suffered straitened circumstances which resulted in their moving several times; this situation provided Zhang contact with people of many social classes and of diverse dialectal backgrounds. He later drew upon this experience when he moved to Peking and turned to writing. Prior to the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) he worked as a school teacher, a journalist, and a minor official. He continued writing during the war, and after the Communist revolution in China he served variously as deputy director of the Central Literary Research Institute, editor of *Renmin wenxue*, and delegate to the National People's Congress.¹

Zhang's first short story, "A Dream of Three-and-a-Half Days" 三天半之夢, was published in 1929 in *Benliu* 奔流, a magazine edited by Lu Xun. Zhang has been lauded as "the most brilliant and powerful short story writer of the thirties", peerless

¹See *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, 2 vols, ed. Howard L. Boorman and Richard C. Howard, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967-1971) Vol.1: pp. 114-115.

in terms of “the economy of his comic art, the depth and range of his satiric representation”.² A prolific author, Zhang’s works number some forty volumes, including collections of short stories, children’s stories, novels, and plays.

“Manufacturer of Tenderness” was originally published in 1934 in *Xiandai* 現代. Set in Peking, this short story satirically depicts the clandestine love affair between “Old Bo”, a married Chinese intellectual, and a female student eleven years his junior. The critic Hu Feng categorizes “Old Bo” as a type of character who, like several characters in some of Zhang’s other stories, exhibits “hypocrisy, banality, and ludicrousness as he plays the game of love”.³

I hope my translation of “Manufacturer of Tenderness” preserves at least a little of the flavour of Zhang’s satiric portrayal of an illicit love affair. If my rendering has failed to do so, allow me to reiterate Old Bo’s pet expression: “Pardon me.”

* * *

THE SKY was so clear that there was not even a wisp of a cloud. Sun and shade were quite bright and hot. On the calendar it was marked as a red-letter day. Make no mistake about it, this was a good day; the park was filled with couples strolling in tight embrace, as if fearful that their partners might run away.

Several unattached fellows, feeling ill at ease, sighed lengthily.

“This weather is really boring.”

“Now if I had a dame in my arms . . .”

“What a bother. In this weather you can’t do anything.”

“The strange thing is that we’re not any worse-looking than Old Bo, but he’s having a love affair and we’re not.”

The one called Old Bo merely laughed.

“Old Bo, hasn’t your brother-in-law written a letter to tell your wife?”

Old Bo shook his head and said, “Even that brother-in-law of mine doesn’t know anything.”

“Does her family know?”

“Whose?”

“Jiaxuan’s family.”

Old Bo shook his head again and then paused for a moment.

“Her elder brother sees me as a trustworthy ‘big brother’.”

“Too bad for him. Maybe her brother thinks you’re impotent. He’s really too naive if he’d go so far as to calmly hand over his younger sister to be looked after by a man.”

²Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas, 1919-1949, ed. Joseph S. M. Lau, C.T. Hsia and Leo Ou-fan Lee, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) p. 334.

³Hu Feng, “Zhang Tianyi lun” 張天翼論 [On Zhang Tianyi], *Zhang Tianyi xuanji* 張天翼選集 [Selected Writings of Zhang Tianyi] (Shanghai: Wanxiang shuwu, n.d.) p.8.

Lighting a cigarette, Old Bo sat down on a chair. He felt that his friends did not quite understand him, so he blew out a milky-white puff of smoke and started chattering.

“My thing with Jiaxuan is not just by chance . . .”

He thought it was nauseating to bring up words like love and romance; consequently, he always used the word “thing” as a substitute.

“As far as that ‘thing’ is concerned, I’m not the least bit casual. My attitude is not like that fellow Wiener’s.¹ Wiener’s romance is . . .”

Someone interrupted him.

“I know, I know. Don’t waste your time. Hurry up and go find your happiness. Someone is waiting for you.”

The fellow saying this pulled a face and let out a protracted sigh.

“Pardon me,” Old Bo said as he donned his hat and left. There was no wind at all; his entire body was gently warmed by the sun.

Old Bo stuck his right hand into his pocket and considered where to go with Jiaxuan today. The reception room of her school was not a place where they could spend much time; moreover, on a fine day like this it wouldn’t do not to go outside for a stroll. But where to go? Every time the two of them met they were faced with the same difficult problem.

“Where shall we go?” he asked.

“Wherever you want to go.”

“Go number one or go number two?”

Her laughter sounded like the ringing of an electric bell. As Old Bo thought, he scratched his head — grayish-white flakes fell from his hair.

“Is Chengnan Park all right? It has flowering crabapples.”

“OK.”

“Why is it that you never come up with any ideas?”

“I think you’re always right about everything. I’ll do whatever you say.”

So Chengnan Park it was.

The two of them, pressed together, walked hand in hand under the flowering crabapple trees, she a head shorter than he. Bees buzzed; the sound of their droning could put you to sleep. Beneath the trees there were also other couples, either strolling or sitting. Those unattached fellows kept a close eye on them.

Old Bo slowed down his pace, then took out and lit a cigarette.

“There are too many people here, darn it.”

“If there were only the two of us that wouldn’t be interesting either.”

She looked at him, and after a while she said, “I always hope there will be lots of couples around — it’s as if . . . as if they were our supporting actors. I’ve always felt that the world belongs to just the two of us.”

They wandered aimlessly under the trees.

“Have you finished writing your essay on love?” She did her utmost to lengthen her stride in order to match her step to his.

¹I have translated Xiangchang (meaning, “sausage”), the nickname of one of Old Bo’s acquaintances, as “Wiener” to preserve the grossly sexual connotations intended by the author.

“Not yet,” he exhaled softly and slowly, “Do you have an opinion about the line of reasoning in my essay?”

“I agree completely, but . . . but . . . but I always think about . . .”

“About what?”

Not answering, she extended her right arm and wrapped it around his waist from the back in order to grasp his right hand. Each time they took a step they bumped shoulders. Old Bo discovered that he was out of step with her, so he switched to his other leg.

“What do you think about?”

“I’m always afraid.”

“You always say that — you’re afraid I don’t feel that ‘thing’ for you. You really . . .”

“I still think so. Love can vanish so easily.”

She stared at the ground. After two or three seconds she suddenly turned her head back to look at him, squeezing his right hand tightly for a moment.

Old Bo looked around in all directions; there was no one else in sight. He stopped walking.

“Didn’t I tell you before? Of course, between rich people, that ‘thing’ will vanish, but we . . . as for our ‘thing’ . . .” He placed one hand against a tree trunk to prop himself up. She put both of her hands on his shoulders.

“To make a long story short, it’s like this . . .” Looking into her eyes, he noticed a speck of black on the white of one eye.

“The real ‘thing’ is not something that will vanish. And that ‘thing’ is . . . that ‘thing’ is . . . let’s sit down.”

And then Old Bo repeated once again what he had already said thirty-six times.

Her eyeballs did not move at all — just stared at him.

His lips were moving laboriously. The sparse whiskers above his mouth and on his chin resembled the green grass on the ground. Beside his right ear there was a round scar as smooth and shiny as a bronze mirror. Whenever he raised his voice the bronze mirror and the green grass quivered as if there were an earthquake.

“Our ‘thing’ is not a matter of chance. We are . . .” He yawned.

Suddenly his face felt ticklish. Only then did he discover that she had placed her head on his shoulder, so he reached out his arm and put it around her.

But he had to finish what he was saying. So he told her, like a schoolboy reciting his textbook from memory, how he was against the kind of “thing” those rich people had, and how he was not in favour of the “glass of water theory” sort of “thing” either.²

The highest standard of that “thing” should be established on the basis of the relationship between colleagues and friends; a couple should be in step with one another and be able to cooperate, “that is to say, a spouse should be a comrade.”

²The “glass of water theory”, the idea that sex should be “as easy and uncomplicated as drinking a glass of water”, was advocated by Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952), the Russian feminist. This theory was espoused by young Chinese radicals who were influenced by Kollontai’s ideas about “free love”. See Alix Holt trans., *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai* (London: Allison & Busby, 1977) p. 13.

And their "thing" was exactly as he had described. Really, it was just like that. He repeated this last sentence three times.

"You have a lot of potential," he said while holding her face in his hands. "In the future you . . . we . . . yes, our 'thing' will be able to further our work . . ."

Their noses were only half an inch apart.

Old Bo's nostrils gave off an odour of onions that Jiaxuan found oppressive.

"Have you been eating onions again?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, you hate the smell, huh?"

"Not at all."

As if to prove that she did not, they kissed. Then they brought their lips together again.

Her hands encircled his neck.

He pressed her close.

She closed her eyes.

His eyes were open, looking at her; the two of them were so close together that he went cross-eyed.

Her breathing was a little rapid, but whether this was due to her excitement or to the oppressive odour of his onions is uncertain.

Only after two or three minutes of this did their lips finally part.

"Your whiskers are tickling me." Still clinging to his neck, she gazed at his eyes, his chin, and his mouth as if she were appraising a work of art.

"I haven't shaved for three weeks."

His whiskers were not terribly comely. They formed a "Fu Manchu" moustache above his mouth, with nary a hair in the vertical groove between his nose and his lips. Several whiskers were yellowish, and a few were brown.

Furthermore, one of the hairs in his nose had grown so long it protruded outside, and he hadn't even attempted to clip it.

To her, it seemed that men cultivated this type of appearance on purpose. His hair was never combed; it was neither parted nor slicked back. His shoes were covered with mud. On his blue gown were two greasy stains. His face, for some reason, looked as though it hadn't been washed today.

He kissed her on the cheek, making a smacking sound.

"In all the time I've been coming to see you I've never thought about grooming. This face, if you'll pardon me, won't get much better even if it's cleaned up."

Jiaxuan crinkled the tip of her nose.

"You're this sloppy on purpose, I know. You don't take me seriously."

"Why, I . . . oh, here you go again. Why do you always . . ."

"I know, I know. After all, it was I who chased you, so you think I must love you no matter what. You take me for . . . for instance . . . for instance . . ."

Old Bo laughed.

"Do you want me to dress up like a pansy?"

"It's not just that. Anyway, you treat me . . ."

The hands that clung to him relaxed. Her eyes stared straight ahead. It looked as though it was no joking matter to her.

"I've never treated you casually. Regarding that 'thing', I am . . . oh. You know

my life and my thinking are . . .”

“Now really. Don’t talk theory! Once you start you get carried away with all that big talk.”

“But I . . .”

With a quick movement he grasped her hand, to the back of which was affixed a small piece of adhesive plaster.

“Did you hurt your hand?”

A couple came strolling toward them from across the way. The woman’s painted eyebrows extended all the way beneath the hair at her temples; her cheeks were smeared with orange powder. The man had bent his head and was blabbering away with her, so all that could be seen was the hair on his head — shiny enough to make you sneeze.

Old Bo wondered uncomfortably if this was the kind of man Jiaxuan wanted him to be like.

The couple came to a standstill in front of them for a moment, then changed direction and went on their way.

Jiaxuan picked up some petals from the ground and held them in her hand, caressing them with her fingers.

“I love you too much. Every day I . . .” She shot a glance at him. “I can’t get anything done, all day long it’s like I’m dreaming. But you . . .”

“Ah, you must think about more important matters. That ‘thing’ between the sexes is not all there is to life.” He cuddled her head.

“You never . . .” Her face was cupped in his hands and tilted upwards so that her line of vision went across from the two sides of her nose to his face; she could vaguely make out the tip of her own nose. “You never take me seriously, so I think . . . for instance — for instance — some day you won’t love me anymore, you’ll . . .”

A tear welled up in each eye and slowly ran from each corner on to her temples.

“Don’t start imagining things. I’ll always feel that ‘thing’ for you . . .” They kissed.

A quarter of an hour later, they strolled out of the park. They wanted to have some tea, but all of the tea stalls were full.

As they walked, they looked at the people having tea. They talked about the woman whose permed hair made her look like a huge-headed monster, and another whose eyebrows were painted on in disjointed lines. Also, there was a fellow sporting a green bow tie who wriggled so much that he looked like a female impersonator in a Chinese opera — enough to give you gooseflesh. Over there, that narrow-shouldered woman . . .

Old Bo lit another cigarette. He puffed out his chest, really feeling rather proud. He had reason to be proud: his frequent analysis of their “thing” led him to believe there was nothing about it that was improper.

She was eleven years younger than he. In the beginning he was only doing her elder brother a favour, looking after her as if she were a child. He was like a father to her, forbidding her to put on powder or lipstick, and advising her on her outside reading. But later on — their “thing” happened.

This was something no one would have expected: that the father of two children, a cold, indifferent fellow like him should ...

However —

“Our ‘thing’ is very dialectical,” he told his friends. “She is progressing rapidly. In the future we . . . I’m now making her understand the ways of the world, guiding her . . . thereafter to take the inevitable path ...”

He looked at his friends, fearing he had gone overboard.

Actually, he was the person who understood her best, of course. She was already collaborating with him now: he was planning a major work analyzing the structure of Chinese society, and she had volunteered to help him organize some data.

“Have you put those things in order yet?”

But she was slow to start.

“What things?” — for a moment she couldn’t remember.

“Well, those counties in northern Anhui province . . . concerning usury, land leases, and so on . . .”

“Not yet,” she laughed.

“Why haven’t you started yet?”

She sighed softly.

“I can’t get anything done, I can only think about you . . .”

“Oh, you’re not going to be one of those people who place love above all else, are you?”

“I know it’s not right, but . . .”

Everytime they met he always had to raise this question; that Tuesday he brought up the subject again.

She hadn’t done anything. She hadn’t even finished reading the few books he’d given her.

After they had chosen a table in a small restaurant, Old Bo grasped Jiaxuan’s arms and told her that there were more important matters than that “thing” between the sexes.

“You must always remember why I feel that ‘thing’ for you. My expectations for you . . .”

He repeated these words several times, then he kissed her face. Not until the waiter came did he sit down at his own place.

However, when he got home at ten o’clock, he recalled again that there were quite a few serious matters he hadn’t discussed with her.

“Those data on the counties in Fengyang are extremely important,” he said to himself as though he were speaking to someone else. He yawned.

At that time it wasn’t really that he hadn’t remembered, it was just that he was afraid she would have been unhappy if he’d been too long-winded.

“She’s still childish. From now on I’ll have to . . .”

He wanted to go to bed, but felt that something was holding him back. He returned to his desk and lit a cigarette.

The pile of things he had to do could not be taken care of tonight. Quite a few letters had gone unanswered. His lecture notes on labour law had to be finished right

away. Moreover, he needed to talk to a lot of people. On his desk there was also a paper by one of his students on the Far East situation that he had not even touched.

Several small insects were stuck to his lamp, and he felt there were some stuck to his heart as well.

Sighing, he took out his unfinished essay on love. He had planned to make it very readable and entertaining, so that anyone could understand it. However, the language was all wrong: it was about as lifeless as his lecture notes on labour law. What's more, the essay was loaded with jargon; some sentences contained three or four clauses, making them so long that the reader wouldn't be able to catch his breath.

"Pardon me, this needs to be rewritten."

Suddenly he felt a little discouraged; it was rather inappropriate for him to be writing such essays.

Consequently, he had set it aside for two weeks. When he came home after class he only thought about writing letters and preparing lecture notes. However, he didn't write a word. He yawned, and pulled the student's paper over to him.

Somewhere someone was taking a nap and snoring like a cow.

He yawned again, blinked a few times, and looked at the paper. The words were so small they resembled ants crawling in columns across the page. Each word was written so that its left side was high and its right side was low, elongated and completely out of proportion.

"He must be following Kang Youwei's calligraphic style," he thought.³

All of a sudden he became extremely agitated. When he thought of all the things he had to do, and the fact that he hadn't done any of them, it was as distressing as having his head bound up in a quilt. The best thing to do would be to prepare the lecture notes straight away.

He searched for a book on the bookcase.

There had never been a day when this bookcase was clean; things were piled on it haphazardly at all angles. In addition, there was a lot of cigarette ash from some unknown time when an ashtray had spilled onto a pile of paper.

He had just put the ashtray on his desk when the phone rang. It was Jiaxuan.

"Why aren't you here yet?"

"Didn't we have a date for tomorrow?" He frowned.

"Ahem, today. The date is for today."

She continued, telling him she had become concerned and that she had waited several hours, doing nothing. She spoke so quickly and shrilly that if he didn't pay close attention much of what she was saying would be lost.

"Are you coming or not? If you're not free . . ."

"OK. I'll be there right away." He sighed.

So again he went to her school's reception room. He sat down on an old chair,

³Kang Youwei (1858-1927) was an eminent scholar and a reformer associated with the ill-fated Hundred Days Reform of 1898. He was both a loyalist to the imperial throne and an idealist with progressive ideas for political, economic, and social reforms. Kang authored a book on calligraphy and was himself a noted calligrapher. Apparently, Zhang Tianyi was not impressed with Kang's handwriting. See *K'ang Yu-wei: A Biography and a Symposium*, ed. Lo Tung-pang (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1967) p.3.

then crossed his right leg over his left.

A lot of students passed by this place, and all of them eyed him with surprise. He stroked his whiskers, disgruntled by the way this school seemed to make its reception room a passageway. The clock on the wall ticked: one minute, two minutes. Five minutes.

The reception room was not very elegant. The varnish had completely faded on the large dining table in the middle of the room. It was possible that the chairs were crawling with bugs. Some photographs of the Summer Palace⁴ hung on the wall; the glass of the picture frames had yellowed and were covered with black spots.

Old Bo regretted that he hadn't brought a book along with him. He yawned and thought about sleeping on the big table.

Twenty minutes later, Jiaxuan finally appeared.

She talked quite a bit, but all she did was tell him she hadn't done anything the whole day. The next step was for them to discuss where they were going to go.

"Please pardon me, this reception room of yours is too . . ." He yawned. "Let's go somewhere for a stroll. Today *you* must decide where to go."

"It's up to you."

"This is more difficult than writing an essay." He crossed his hands behind his head.

"Why are you so lethargic today?"

"Oh, I'm exhausted. Not enough sleep."

That day they went to Beihai Park.⁵ They made their way into a cave, neither of them saying a word.

"Oh, really. What's wrong with you today?"

"I'm thinking about something." He let out a long sigh. Then he talked about that student's paper. "He explained the differences in the China policy of the Japanese cabinet and the military as a conflict between capitalism and feudalistic influences . . ."

She stopped suddenly and drew him to her.

"You're always so preoccupied, as if . . . as if . . ." She paused.

"When you're with me you feel bored, I know. To you I'm already . . . already . . ." Her eyes shifted upward, filled with tears.

He thought, she needs tenderness.

Thereupon, he steadily laid on some tenderness. He cupped her face in his hands. Her face was rather long; he kissed her from her forehead down to her chin, which took quite a bit of time.

His eyes moved back and forth across her face as if climbing a mountain. Her pointed nose was a mountain peak. The frontal bone was a large precipice. He could see everything exceptionally distinctly: the muscles on her face were composed of line after line of minuscule wrinkles covered with fine yellowish hairs, which became darker and thicker above her mouth, just like a moustache.

⁴Constructed in 1888 by the Empress Dowager Ci Xi, the Summer Palace in Peking was destroyed by Western forces in 1900 but restored in 1903.

⁵Beihai (literally, "North Lake") is a park located in the northern part of the Imperial City in Peking.

At this moment his lips were positioned just below her eyes. Here there were three freckles. Below this, there were two pale red spots which faced each other from a distance. Then he passed by a mole and after going a little further down the path he came to her mouth. The lips, tightly pursed, resembled a slice of raw beef. A little farther along was the chin, of course, upon which there were several pimples.

“Do you really love me?” She lifted up her face.

“I truly feel that ‘thing’ for you.”

Smack. Smack. Smack.

Then he rested a moment, taking a breath as if he were exhausted from his work. Four or five seconds later, four lips were once again pressed together. His mouth burned: he had just smoked a cigarette. His tongue was as coarse as that of a cat.

Her mouth tasted something like santonin.⁶

After they stopped kissing, he asked her what she’d eaten today.

“What did I eat? I couldn’t eat a thing,” she said softly. “I’m always thinking and I’m always afraid, I feel . . . as if — as if — it’s a bad omen . . .”

“A bad omen?” He yawned.

She looked at him steadily.

“Oh, let’s not talk about it. Really.”

She started walking slowly and he followed.

“Well, if you’ve got something to say, then say it.” He put his hands on her shoulders.

She didn’t say anything. Silence.

All of a sudden, she leaned on his chest and began to cry.

He stroked her head, while his mind laboured strenuously:

“Pardon me, she needs tenderness. Yes, that’s it, she needs tenderness. Pardon me, she really . . .”

Thereupon, he rested the side of his face with the scar on it upon her hair.

She was still sobbing. She felt her heart was empty and needed something to fill it up. She hated the way Old Bo had been acting recently: whenever he was in a good mood he treated her perfunctorily; if he was in a bad mood he was always so lackadaisical and yawned all the time. It was just as she had said: he didn’t take her seriously.

“You don’t know what I feel for you . . . for you . . . I love you too much . . .”

However, he acted as if nothing had happened. He remembered only those data, talked only about his pet theories and about various opportunities, or urged her not to let love get in the way of serious matters and not to act coy.

She wished they could always be together — embracing and kissing. He should say passionately, “I love you! I love you!” He should regard her as the most important thing in the whole universe.

But he wanted to avoid even those words, saying only: “That ‘thing’! That ‘thing’!”

“He loves too casually.” At this thought she had to start crying.

⁶Santonin is a drug taken to expel or destroy parasites in the intestines.

For instance, when he came to pick her up he was intentionally so — just look at his moustache, his hair, his shoes!

Sometimes she would lose her temper. When Old Bo asked about those books or those data, she would scream: “Oh, really! Every time we meet you ask the same things, I’m sick and tired of it! You simply take me for a fool who doesn’t understand anything. You simply — simply — are insulting me!”

“Oh, can’t I even ask? I think recently you’ve . . .”

“I’ve been insulted by you so much that I’ve gotten used to it. I’ve been . . .” She cried. “You say you’re ugly, but you’re obviously being sarcastic, implying I’m ugly. You always . . .”

“What’s wrong with you . . .”

“I know, I know. I understand everything. Don’t take me for an idiot. You’re deceitful. You obviously don’t love me — but your methods are very ingenious: you say that love shouldn’t get in the way of serious matters, you say you’ve got a lot of things you haven’t done, and you think you can get rid of me that way, you can . . . you can . . .”

She thought he would throw his arms around her, but he didn’t.

“What?” He looked strained. “If that’s what you think, then . . .”

“You obviously don’t love me, you obviously . . . but you’ve got a big theory to defend yourself. You take me for a . . .”

“Now, even in principle you . . .”

“It’s that same old stuff again, that same old stuff again. If you . . . you can leave . . .”

He sighed.

“Then what is there to talk about!” he said, gritting his teeth. “Only just now did I realize you are . . .”

He put on his hat and left.

She pursued him.

After some thirty to sixty metres, she caught up with him and pulled him back by the arm.

“What is it?” He stood still.

“I was just joking.”

She laughed, her body shaking. Giving him a sidelong glance, she wiped her tears.

Then he repeated the same old things. She believed him. He talked and talked and asked again about those books and those data. He uttered a lengthy sigh.

She still hadn’t gotten anything done.

“This is no way to act. You’ve got to overcome this.”

“Mm.”

“Give those data back to me, I’ll turn them over to someone else to . . .”

“No.” She shook her head conquettishly; even her body shook.

He shrugged his shoulders. He wanted to tell her from now on not to be so flighty, but it was not easy for him to open his mouth.

Jiaxuan had kept those data for over a month. He asked her about them every time he saw her, and he had asked her twelve times.

After each meeting Old Bo returned home very late, dozing off in the rickshaw. Whenever he thought about the fact that he hadn't done anything, he became anxious. Sometimes he wanted to throw a tantrum, but he didn't know if he should blame himself or someone else. Once in bed he couldn't get to sleep for a long while: all the complaints that she had spoken so quickly and shrilly kept echoing in his ear.

"It's a mess." When friends asked him how things were, that was all he had to say.

"Is something wrong?"

He screwed up his face and said, "She wants tenderness. Except for tenderness it seems the world doesn't exist. How can a person produce that much tenderness? After all, one's energy must be spent on more important things."

Whenever he went to see her he always felt there was something heavy weighing on his head. Yes, he had to comfort her. He had to think of a place for them to go to take a stroll. He had to come up with a lot of things to say. He had to try to stifle his yawns: moreover, he couldn't mention the things he had to do.

Therefore, kissing became routine business. As he embraced her he thought, "In the future, when we're living together, how many times must we kiss in one day? Thirty . . . pardon me, perhaps thirty-five."

If they were short by one or two, she surely would say tearfully, "You obviously don't love me, you obviously don't love me!" In that case he would have to push aside his stack of papers and hug her — possibly he would even have to knock over a bottle of blue ink, making a total mess of his books and papers.

"Pardon me, in the future I'll have to use an ink box⁷ for writing."

He gazed at the speck of black on her eyeball.

"Why did you think of that all of a sudden?"

"It's nothing." He placed his right hand on top of her left hand — it was longer than hers by half an inch.

She stared at his face as if counting the hairs of his eyebrows: in the corners of his eyes were several horizontal wrinkles that looked like the whorls on a clam shell. There were a few red lines in the whites of his eyes. His gaze were fixed vacantly downwards in front of him.

"I can see that you're definitely tired of me." She struggled to affect a calm tone of voice.

He shot a glance at her; his tongue seemed to have been tied down, "I feel that if we go on like this . . . oh, it's a mess. Every time I come to see you — I always feel it's — it's — like repaying a debt . . ."

Silence.

He took out a match to light a cigarette, "You simply haven't gotten anything done, and if it goes on like this . . . As for me, I've got a big stack of things I've put aside. When I think about it, I . . ."

Jiaxuan picked up the used matchstick from the ground and broke it to bits.

"I know you're right." She looked at the small fragments of the match in her hand, her fingers blackened.

⁷Ink boxes are small ink containers used for Chinese calligraphy or painting.

"This is no good for either of us. We're both being hindered." After he said this he blew out a ring of smoke.

With her right hand she fanned away the smoke in front of her nose; it took her a great deal of effort to smile.

"Let's free ourselves, then."

For quite a while, neither of them said anything.

There was still half a cigarette left; Old Bo tossed it away. He stood up.

"I really have to do some work, I really have to . . . if things go on like this, what can be done — I've neglected everything, crucial matters . . ."

"Then go do what you have to . . . your coming here — is wasting your . . ."

All the wrinkles on his face contracted. He paused for a moment, then abruptly raised his head, "Let's not see each other for a while, I have to . . ."

Her eyes were glistening.

"OK."

There was silence.

As they prepared to part company, they kissed quite a few times. Pardon me, possibly more than thirty-five.

Jiaxuan encircled Old Bo's neck with her hands; she kissed the scar beside his ear, kissed the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, and kissed the whiskers on his chin. She smelled the odour of onions, of cigarettes, and of the grease in his hair.

Old Bo's kisses were more spirited than before, but he still went cross-eyed when he looked at her face. He felt she was lovelier today than she had ever been.

Uttering a sigh, Old Bo began to walk away.

She stood there watching him go.

"Old Bo," she suddenly called out in a tremulous voice. She caught up with Old Bo and hugged him so hard he couldn't breathe easily. "I have the feeling this is . . . I have the feeling now is the last time, the last . . . you . . . let's kiss one more time . . ."

She exerted all her mortal strength to hold back her sobs, producing a sniffing sound in her nostrils.

Her moist face was pressed against his, and a salty taste filled his mouth.

When Old Bo climbed into a rickshaw it was already midnight. All the shops on the street were locked up tight, and it was almost impossible to imagine the bustling scene there during the day. There was no one except for a policeman who resembled a wooden pole planted in the street.

"I'm free, if you'll pardon me."

His heart suddenly began to ache; he almost wanted to have the rickshaw turn back.

"Pardon me, please exercise a little restraint."

The next day he thought about nothing but arranging the things he was going to do. However, sometimes his thoughts would dwell upon that "thing". "It's really too bad," he said, "everyone thinks his own 'thing' is so right and so wonderful. Old Zhang, wouldn't you say that's a shame? But in terms of our lives, she and I . . ."

He lit a cigarette and sat down at his desk. He clicked his tongue, then unconcernedly called out: "Pardon me, I've got to do some work. That's right, I've got to get down to a little serious business. That's right, that's right, pardon me."