

張潔：他有什麼病？

What's Wrong with Him? — excerpts

By Zhang Jie

Translated by Gladys Yang



Zhang Jie

Translator's Introduction

“What’s Wrong With Him?” starts in an airport where passengers are waiting apathetically for a plane already two hours late. A doctor scans their faces and speculates what illness each may have. He believes there is something wrong with everyone.

This work written by Zhang Jie in 1986 presents a series of neurotics and describes the social conditions which have unhinged them. Much of the action centres around a badly equipped and understaffed hospital, where a lift out of order is left unrepaired for three months and emergency cases may die because of delays on the way to the operating room. The doctors and nurses are overworked, underpaid, anaemic and irritable, living in cramped, noisy quarters. If a patient dies his relatives may beat them. Hangers-on of VIPs will bully them. One of them reflects that the authorities equate intellectuals with dogs.

Zhang Jie’s earlier works such as “Love Must Not Be Forgotten”, *The Ark* and *Leaden Wings* have familiarized readers with her strong sense of justice, her hatred of bureaucracy and the vestiges of feudalism in China. Her outspokenness has made her a popular but controversial writer. However, many readers dislike her romantic, sentimental style and passages of purple prose. In this respect “What’s Wrong With Him?” breaks new ground. It is mordant with crude and sordid episodes.

Reprinted from Zhang Jie, As Long As Nothing Happens, Nothing Will (London: Virago Press, 1988) by permission of Virago Press.

REGARDING YOUR ACADEMIC CAREER, your parents may have lacked forethought. They should have sent you from the start to a model kindergarten, from which you could have gone on to a first-rate middle school. And it didn't occur to them, or maybe they couldn't afford it, to engage a tutor for you while you were in junior middle school, to supplement what you were taught there. So you flunked the college entrance exam, and became unemployed. No, here we call it "waiting for employment". You were waiting for employment. You might not be too bright, but you were a decent youngster who didn't want to steal or sponge on your parents.

The Central Committee's call to expand private enterprise gave you your opening. You travelled all the way from Guangzhou and Sha Tau Kok¹ to Peking, Lanzhou and Xi'an selling jeans, cheap Hong Kong cosmetics and patent leather boots. Starting off in a small way you found yourself rich overnight. Could easily afford to buy your future in-laws ten catties of crabs costing twenty-five *yuan* a catty. Their eyes crinkled into slits like crescent moons. They only wished they could marry you themselves. You felt really good! But on your next trip, like a fool, you made the mistake of laying out your whole capital and interest, not realizing that thousands of other people were now in the same line of business. You didn't realize either that jeans and T-shirts were no longer the rage. Besides, tons of highly profitable clothes were being shipped in duty-free from Japan—it hadn't occurred to our Customs that such things would be imported—clothes stripped from the dead or picked out of garbage heaps. These, though second-hand, were smarter than those from the street markets in Sha Tau Kok.

That busted you. Busted you completely. You were unemployed again. No, waiting again for employment. But you had to put on a bold face for your pals, future wife and in-laws. When your future wife and in-laws dropped out of sight and your buddies cold-shouldered you, you still had to put on a bold face.

Finally, though, you reached the end of your tether. What could you do?

If you persisted in smiling, smiling a warm, sincere, enthusiastic smile, a modest, respectful, approving, admiring smile, the muscles of your face started aching and twitching. Finally the left side of your face twisted up, including your left eyebrow, left eye and left corner of your mouth. And nothing would cure this contortion, not hot compresses, acupuncture or applications of eel blood. You longed to find a place where your facial muscles could rest.

Suppose your wife died last year of carbon-monoxide poisoning, making you afraid to light a coal stove again. But your small room faces north and gets no sunshine all year round, so that hunched up with cold you start having heart trouble. And you've got no money to go through the back door, can only keep writing applications for new housing. You've written enough now to paper a whole room. But you're better off than some others, there are plenty worse off than you. Don't you know that? Newly-weds without a room can only make love on some

¹ A small town on the border between China and Hong Kong.

bench in a park, taking along their marriage certificate to prove to the police that they are lawfully wedded. Even such senior scholars as X, an expert on English literature, and Y, an expert on American literature, haven't benefited yet from the policy of improving the conditions of intellectuals. They still live in leaky, draughty, ramshackle rooms. And who are you? What have you done for the country? Can you compare with them? Go to the back of the queue.

You have to be an official to get housing. Experts and scholars don't count. Once you make it to deputy bureau head you'll be given a flat, a car, a telephone and higher pay. Everything will be delivered to your door. That's why in some organizations they have six department heads in charge of one clerk. But a dolt like you can never hope for a post that will bring you housing. All leading positions big and small in your unit have been occupied by others who are dividing the loot.

Or why not imitate Hans Christian Anderson's little match girl and strike matches to warm yourself? You won't. That's a fairy tale for children.

You're cold. Put on your quilted coat, quilted waistcoat, trousers and shoes. Put on your cap and scarf, oh, yes, and a gauze mask. As if you were an explorer at the South Pole. But you're still cold—what can you do?

Suppose the head of the Personnel Department happens to be your good friend and has told you that in view of your qualifications you are going to be appointed head of the Foreign Affairs Department. You may already have been trained in leadership in that centre in San Francisco.

For instance, how do you give effective leadership?

How do you handle contradictions between different departments?

How do you deal with clients' complaints?

How do you hold effective meetings?

How do you become a good speaker?

How do you assess the work of subordinates?

How do you write summaries?

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You come first in all unofficial tests. But up pops a young fellow to occupy the place that should be yours by rights. Though he can't understand simple English like "eggs over easy" or "sunny side up".

You dare not protest and you dare not complain because he's the son of a powerful minister. And if you complained you might even lose your position as deputy department head. You have to accept his appointment cheerfully and do your best to support him or, strictly speaking, do his work for him. Have to put on armour to hide your jealousy, to hide it from gimlet eyes able to see through steel and the eyes of those who analyse you or love you. What if you want to take off your armour and relax a bit?

Suppose you work single-mindedly for years on a problem as yet unsolved. Like those characters in novels or films who drink ink instead of milk, blunder into telegraph poles or eat rubber instead of pickles. One day at last you make a sudden break-through and become a celebrity at home and abroad. You can straighten up from your microscope or computer to look around. You discover

the goodness of the world, the generosity of human beings including, naturally, women. And how these women love you—especially her! She worships your brilliance, not setting special store by the Nobel Prize you have won. You face up bravely to the contradiction between your career and marriage, a contest in which you must triumph or die for your cause. You marry this woman who, for love of you, has attempted suicide three times by jumping into the river. You'd never known that a woman could melt a man's heart like this. Even when you go abroad you keep this little woman in mind, your heart aching with love for her.

Long live the food allowance!

Apart from your theses, your suitcases are packed with instant noodles or hardtack. Your academic achievements make your foreign hosts put you up in five-star hotels. But no matter what hotel you are in the corridors are pervaded by the smell of Chinese instant noodles. You clutch the money saved on meals, your legs shaking as the result of prolonged malnutrition. For the first time in your life you buy a woman's wristwatch. A dainty, 18K gold wristwatch with only four marks on its brown dial designed for a modern young lady. From its fine chain hangs a small pendant. Whenever she raises her hand that pendant will swing enchantingly on her smooth wrist.

From your second trip abroad you bring back

From your third trip

From your fourth trip

It gets so that the sight of instant noodles makes you want to throw up like a woman with morning sickness.

In the end you discover that she doesn't love you. She is having a secret affair with her handsome young lover and playing around with various celebrities. She has sucked in your fame and status (a Nobel Prize winner's wife can count as China's First Lady) and is also enjoying the love of a lusty young man. She is surely the happiest woman in the world.

You're already over fifty, the cynosure of all eyes at home and abroad. You can't afford to appear in gossip columns, and you can't say no to her when she's shedding eye-drop-induced tears. If you so much as have diarrhoea it gives rise to all sorts of rumours Not only must you pretend that you know nothing, you must give everyone, including her, the impression that your home is ideally happy Sometimes you are so sick of this pretence that you contemplate suicide, but for the sake of your work you have to live on. So now what can you do?

Say you've always played the part of an iron lady, so tough that you can eat nails. There'll come a time when you can't keep it up and long to have a good cry. But you can't find anywhere to cry, so what's to be done?

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In a word, when the suppression of all your feelings seems rational and essential yet finally you can't take it any more and your only way out is to lose your mind, you simply mustn't go mad. You don't need this world, but this world needs you. How could clever people do without idiots like you?

Come, let's go to the bath-house. That's where you are happiest. Here you can

forget your frustration. For a mere sixty cents you can stay as long as you like—as long as the place is open. Let's hope that bath-houses never disappear.

Watched by the attendant you take off your coat and clothes, revealing your handsome curves or the ugly scars of caesarean or breast operations on your lean flabby body.

They estimate your income from your underclothes, discounting your overcoat. Because Chinese scholars, even those as poor as Kong Yiji,² always wore a long gown as a status symbol.

In these surroundings you can learn to forget the idea that privacy is sacred and inviolable; you can also learn to forget your sense of shame.

Bath-houses may well be heaven for homosexuals—can you swear there are no homosexuals in China? Can you swear that no one's lustful eyes are caressing and debauching you here?

Bath-houses may also be good places for sketching nudes without having to hire models.

You open the locker with its blend of at least a thousand women's sweat, and add your own to it. Even a police dog might be flummoxed here, and if he gets it wrong, might be demobbed and served up as a meal. The papers advise hepatitis-B victims to keep away from bath-houses, to avoid spreading infection. Sound enough, but then where can they go for a bath? They can't copy some of the ethnic minorities who are bathed only on their death-beds. If they bathe at home, summer isn't so bad, but what about the winter? Apart from high officials, who has hot water on tap twenty-four hours a day? If not for twenty-four hours, two hours a week would do.

Then you walk into the bath-room with its skylight. The steamy room is like an enormous monster with countless heads, arms and legs, countless breasts and sexual organs. A conglomeration even more appalling than space-ships, rockets or hydrogen bombs. If you were to cut off an arm or a sexual organ another would appear at once in its place. Would appear simultaneously. How much time and effort are needed to build a rocket or space-ship? Yet in a few seconds only, millions of body parts are produced.

You jockey for a tap with three or four heads, seven or eight arms and legs, and the water is now icy cold, now scalding hot. On the other side of the bath-house two voices are raised in a quarrel over water. These voices bounce off the tiled walls, in a flash becoming so amplified that the world is swallowed up in a raging sea of sound. A little boy maybe brought by his mum to her bath-room, or a little girl taken by her dad to his, sets up a wail in tribute to this first lesson in sex. Piercing as a clarion call to charge, that wail resounds through the storm

Come on, you can do as you please here, laugh or cry, grind your teeth, defecate or drop your mask. No one will pay the slightest attention to you.

"Shall we scrub each other's backs?" Chen Yaomei jumped. That voice made her suspect she'd come through the wrong door.

² A penniless scholar in one of Lu Xun's stories.

The women's bath-room is on the right, the men's on the left. Had she gone through the right door or the left one? The right. No, the left. No, the right.

She looked round and saw one shoulder of the speaker. "I've washed my back," she said. She wouldn't dream of letting a stranger touch her. Especially someone with a voice like that.

"Will you scrub mine then?"

Yaomei felt it would be difficult to refuse.

The other, strapping woman had a back as broad and solid as a pastry-board. Yaomei had to stand on tiptoe to reach her shoulders. The towel rubbed down that woman's back and, like rolling up a carpet, rubbed off whole layers of dirt. This roll of dirt was thinner at the sides, thicker in the middle. It dropped lightly down like a tapeworm, though different in colour. The bubbling stream of water carried it off along with coils of hair, empty plastic shampoo packets and soap, sluicing them into the sewers.

What a boon water is.

At last one of the nearby taps was free. Water was still gushing from it. The city's water level was said to be very low. Yaomei turned off the tap. At once someone called, "What are you doing? I want to rinse myself."

"You can turn it on when you're ready."

"I've paid sixty cents, why not let me have a good bath?" The tap was turned on again. The hand gripping it seemed to be wringing Yaomei's throat.

Yes, she'd paid sixty cents, better let her have a good bath.

The flowers in the park may wither overnight as if galloped over by stampeding horses; the newly erected statue on the street may have one of its arms or legs knocked off; the marble floor of a new bookstore, post-office or museum may suddenly be spat on . . . Such vandalism is actually a form of revenge for years and years of frustration. Yaomei understood that.

Besides, turning off a tap for a while could hardly solve the city's water shortage.

There were only four dozen bath-houses in town. How could they cater for several million people?

Gradually scrubbing backs stopped disgusting Yaomei, who began to see the point of it. At all events today she'd helped one of those millions get rid of the dirt accumulated over at least a month.

Just then not far away she heard a husky yet haunting melody. A cross between singing and crooning. She searched for its source. The singer was a woman of indeterminable age, whose long hair, newly washed, lay coiled like a snake over her smooth, plump shoulders. Yaomei had never seen such beautiful shoulders. And the woman's waist was as slender as a girl's. Yet her face which seemed now young, now old, was criss-crossed with fine wrinkles. She was singing raptly to herself.

She was in another world, that was obvious. The earth had split open and she was standing high on the edge of the fault. The wind on the steppe was blowing hotter and hotter, the sun behind her was shining more and more coldly.

How had she bored her way out from the loess heaped over her for billions of years?

Yaomei couldn't understand a word she was singing. But she knew this was a song about the subterranean world below the loess.

Yaomei felt herself falling into the fault. All around her was murky. Some force was whirling, squeezing, tugging her. After an initial struggle she remained passive. Even enjoyed the comfort of sinking down. Enjoyed it so much that she nearly cried out in fear. She tossed her head to shake off the drops of water on her face, blurring her eyes, till once again she could see those countless heads, arms and legs, countless breasts and sexual organs.

The singer stared at her mysteriously as if they had some secret understanding. As if she had carried Yaomei off in a dream. What had Yaomei done in that dream? She couldn't remember.

Yaomei put on her clothes and left the bath-house. By the ticket-window stood a foreigner with yellow hair and blue eyes. What did he want?

The bus was fearfully crowded. The conductress kept begging, "Who'll vacate a seat for someone with a child?"

Yaomei hung her head so that only the crown of her hat could be seen. Just now that fellow's eyes had swept over her neck to paw her breasts.

She trod lightly on him with the tip of her foot. He was tightly buttoned up in his tunic suit, even his collar was buttoned. Still she could see his flesh pulsating. She trod on him again and tilted the crown of her hat. She could see that roguish look stealing from the corners of his eyes. She cast a side-long glance at him, this stunt was easily learned from TV shows.

"What's your opinion of public bath-houses?" she asked.

He sprang up from his seat and moved away, washing his hands of her. Under his breath he muttered, "Crazy, crazy."

A poster in their university advertised a lecture on literature. The speaker was the well-known writer Mr Norman. His subject was "New Trends in World Literature". The organizers were the research students of the Department of Chinese Literature.

Yaomei detested the college's teaching methods and examination system. This term she'd tried cutting classes, and her examination results had remained the same.

So she was only too happy to wander around.

She squeezed on to a window-ledge from where she could look down on the auditorium. The cream of the Department of Chinese Literature were strutting up and down the aisles as if unable to find seats good enough to accommodate their great talent.

The crème-de-la-crème was one who had won a name for his story "A World Full of Thighs". Working for his Master's degree, he was also a spare-time writer. He had poured all his piddling dreams about girls into that story.

Draped over his shoulders was the blue serge coat which he never took off,

not even when buying breakfast in the canteen, probably not even when he went to bed. Under one arm he had a copy of *Ulysses*, now all the rage and the best gauge of a writer's calibre, as well of course as some letters from foreigners and announcements of literary conferences. He slapped A's chest, chucked B under the chin, pinched C's nose, swore to D that E was a scoundrel, to F that G was a bastard, and to H that K was dog-shit. Only then did he sit down in the middle of the front row.

The speaker was introduced by the department head. "... Mr Norman, one of the most brilliant contemporary writers, is in the forefront of the new trend in world literature. For students of our department to listen to his lecture and read his works will provide a wonderful source of inspiration. Today our staff and students are most fortunate to have the chance to hear him So let us welcome Mr Norman with hearty applause"

Mr Norman spoke for two hours on "Arses and Roses", after which he invited questions.

His answers were concise if irrelevant. After each reply he pointed at the questioner down below: "Have I answered your question?"

They could only make a show of both nodding and shaking their heads.

The accent of the overseas Chinese who was interpreting Mr Norman's answers added colour to the pretence of understanding what was gibberish.

"I've got a question." Unlike the other students, Yaomei didn't get down from her perch on the window-ledge and run up to the platform. "May I ask you what your motive is in writing?"

The top students at once started sneering.

"Where's *she* from?"

"The Physics Department."

"What's she doing here? How can she understand?"

"A dilettante!"

"Asking a childish question like that she'll make Mr Norman laugh at us, lose face for our department."

The interpreter expressed anger on Mr Norman's behalf. "Sorry, I can't translate a question like that."

"Why not?"

"It's too impolite."

"Is he polite, making fools of everyone?"

The top students started booing Yaomei again. The interpreter cast her smiles into the audience as though each smile was a meaty bone "It's not my duty to answer you," she said.

"You can say that as you're hired to translate by Mr Norman, not by me. I've no foreign currency for you, and as *renminbi* is worthless you probably wouldn't want it." With that Yaomei repeated her question in English.

The interpreter had never dreamed that this locally born and bred, countrified-looking girl could speak better English than she did.

If Chinese decide to do something and are given the least chance, they can always succeed.

Five thousand candidates took the TOEFL test in that city in 1984, and the three who got full marks had taught themselves English. In 1985, fifty thousand candidates sat the TOEFL test.

Mr Norman thought for a moment, then said, "I'm this world's god."

Yaomei retorted, "In that case this world must be impotent"

The interpreter threw down her glass of tea. The department head, not knowing English, couldn't understand what was up.

Mr Norman decided to be tolerant. "OK, OK!" he said.

There was a general outcry.

"Hooligan."

"Shameless."

"Make her apologize."

"Throw her out."

. . . .

The department head finally caught on. "I'm sorry, so sorry," he apologized. "That student is unbalanced."

By now the interpreter had gone on strike. The department head could only throw up his hands and shrug (very like a foreigner). "We have no common language, too bad."

The bus had passed Gold Dragon Hotel.

She'd soon be home.

Yaomei lived just behind Gold Dragon Hotel, opposite its row of dustbins.

As usual a crowd had gathered round the dustbins, waiting to scavenge the hotel refuse which had already been sifted by the staff.

Foreigners are most generous. They throw away old ties; razor blades; half-full bottles of instant coffee; ball-point pens; stationery; white paper with foreign printing on one side, the back of which can be written on or sold for a good price to paper-mills; plastic bags; instructions for the use of samples (these make good covers for school books or can be sold to be pulped); plywood painted with advertisements (which can serve as cupboard shelves) An article in a French paper described Chinese women who go to France as "France's fiancées." The Chinese are growing more and more westernized.

The Party secretary called Chen Liansheng in for another talk lasting two hours.

Starting with modernization he went on to raising the standard of living; the importance of public health; the development of the economy and its bearing on the raising of living standards; the medical facilities of their city and hospital and the shortage of nurses; their hospital's long-term and short-term plans; the lack of funds to enlarge the out-patient department, operating rooms and wards; the hospital's relations with its affiliated institutions; the discipline of Party members, discipline shown by acting in unison

Finally the Party secretary said, "Dr Chen, I hope you'll consider these things Our construction funds won't be approved till his father gives the green light.

As for clearing up the question of his wife's hymen, it's just because he's so confused that I think he should have a chance to raise his level. So I hope you'll take him on as a research student."

After leaving the operating table Chen Liansheng had spent a dozen hours in the observation room. He was worn out. Wanted desperately to sleep, to lie straight down on the floor. But he couldn't possibly doze off while the Party secretary was talking to him. Warm drowsiness flooded over him, invading every cell in his body. He struggled feebly against his somnolence, half his mind awake, half asleep.

The sleeping part of his mind had a dream. Dreamed that he had changed into a fancy cream cake and been put on a huge cake-stand. People were sitting all around this stand. Or so he guessed, not being able to see them. Since he was a cake, of course he ought to be eaten. Especially as he was already on the stand.

The people sitting around seemed to have no arms or legs, no noses, eyes or mouths, only long, thick tongues.

They were politely deferring to each other.

"Help yourself."

"After you."

"Don't stand on ceremony."

Though no one reached out or cut him into slices, Chen Liansheng was aware that he was diminishing. First the cream rose on his head vanished, then the cream trimming and finally the sponge cake.

Their long thick tongues, soft yet sharp, licked at him persistently, licked him up bit by bit.

This won't do, he thought. He couldn't let himself be eaten up so senselessly. Was this eating? What way was this to eat? But what did eating involve? No matter how they ate they'd swallow him up. Could he help it if they used tongues instead of teeth? He felt confused. The sleeping half of his brain told him, "No." The wakeful part said, "Yes."

The Party secretary was also confused. "Well, Dr Chen, will you or won't you?"

By the time he got on the bus Chen Liansheng was still nodding. By now his whole mind was asleep. And sleeping in a most undignified fashion. His head kept flopping to one side, making the smart young lady beside him raise her eyebrows and shrink back. He began drooling. As the bus jolted along he slobbered on his jacket.

His jacket was of good material, well cut. He had picked it up for two pounds in a London flea market. Some people despised him for this. The money earned by lecturing abroad had been spent on equipment and books for the hospital, or on stethoscopes as presents for his colleagues.

"Last stop, hey, everyone out!" called the conductress.

Chen Liansheng sprang up and blundered forward. "How's the patient? How's the patient?" he demanded.

"What are you talking about?" The conductress glared at him.

He woke up then. Waving one hand in front of his face he got off without a word.

“Off his nut!” She slammed the door shut.

A visitor was waiting for him at home. At first he thought the Party secretary had followed him and wondered how he could have got there so quickly, till he remembered that the Party secretary could get a hospital car.

His wife, not her usual placid self, jumped up from the sofa. “At last! Teacher Li has been waiting for hours.”

His wife looked as if she were flunking a test or undergoing re-education. He was all too familiar with the feeling. The lives of intellectuals were a long series of tests and spells of re-education. Tests on this or that, re-education of one sort or another.

She said to the visitor, “Have a talk with Old Chen. There’s something I have to see to, if you’ll excuse me.” At once she went into the kitchen.

Chen Liansheng just couldn’t blame his wife for her selfishness.

“The gas is finished, we need a new cylinder,” she called from the kitchen.

Teacher Li, in charge of Yaomei’s class, often called on them because Yaomei was a problem student. Her face was therefore familiar to Chen. For a second though he didn’t recognize her. Once more his brain seemed divided into two. One half took Teacher Li for the Party secretary and vice versa. One could tell the two apart. When he recognized the teacher he said, “Excuse me, Teacher Li, I have to fetch another cylinder of gas.”

“Go ahead, I’ll wait.” The teacher was experienced in waging protracted warfare.

The old fellow in charge of gas was just locking up. “Why didn’t you come earlier?” His face was black. “Can’t have this. I’ve already done two hours’ overtime. You all say you’re busy, busy. Of course you get paid overtime, but who’s going to pay *me*?”

Chen Liansheng looked at his watch: it was nine o’clock. “I’m so sorry. I’ve only just got home.”

“Isn’t there anyone else in your family?”

“Yes. But . . .” How could he explain that his wife had been tied up with a visitor ready to “battle to the death”?

The old fellow glanced at him and was touched by his tousled white hair.

He was too kind-hearted, this gas man. White-haired old men, maid-servants, children, women, he pitied them all. Pitied all who came here for gas. They all looked so exhausted and frantic. He tried to guess this customer’s occupation. Was he in a government office? No, in that case he wouldn’t leave work so late. Cadres had cushy jobs. Supposed to start work at eight, they didn’t have to show up till half-past and could sit there in comfort until the ten o’clock break, when they would start to play cards or chess. Then in no time it was eleven and they would flip through the papers, sip tea and chat until they knocked off to have lunch in the canteen or go home for a meal. The afternoon was the same. At most they wrote a report or document a few hundred characters long and made a few telephone calls—that was all they did. He knew. His son-in-law was a clerk in a government office.

Were those few hundred characters and those few telephone calls worth a salary of over a hundred a month? The old man didn't think so. Still, he unlocked the door.

As the door opened he wondered, "How come I've opened it again?"

The small room reeked of gas, though the valves on all the cylinders were screwed tight. Anyone working here all day would turn black in the face. But where could you find a valve that didn't leak either gas, water or oil? There are no such valves in China. Chen knew that all the pipes in his flat leaked and constantly had to be mended.

Passing the Neighbourhood Committee office in Building Two, Chen saw that its lights were still on and three people were in there talking. He put down his gas cylinder and went in. "Excuse me, can I use your phone?" he asked.

Since the public telephone had been dismantled he kept coming here to phone. Came so often that the people there found it difficult to refuse him permission.

He made four calls to different wards to ask after his patients. Each time he was told all was well.

All well! But presently there might be changes for the worse. He gave a sigh of mingled relief and worry. At least he could have supper with an easy mind.

After finishing his calls he expressed his thanks. One old lady quipped, "A chief surgeon like you, why don't they give you a phone?"

He could only chuckle by way of a rejoinder.

He found Teacher Li still sitting in his room and reproached himself for having forgotten her. After putting down the gas cylinder he grabbed a towel and sat down to listen to her.

"Been busy recently?"

"Uh-huh." He wiped his left cheek with the towel.

"Is your wife all right?"

"Uh-huh." He wiped his right cheek with the towel.

"I hear you're going abroad. Never mind. If your wife has no one to help her out she can stay with us and I'll look after her. Don't worry. Don't be polite. She's an invalid"

By now Chen had mopped his face several times.

After demonstrating her patience, warm-heartedness and concern, the teacher laughed diffidently, then came to the point. "It's like this, after the winter holidays we organized discussions among the students about what they'd seen and heard in the holidays at home. Their accounts pointed to the conclusion that there's been a big improvement in the Party's style of work. It was generally recognized that in the past a one-sided way of thinking had exaggerated the faults in our country's advance. Weakened faith in the Party and government had given rise to the longing for a saviour—that was absolutely wrong"

Who had concluded that the Party's style of work had improved so much?

Whose way of thinking was one-sided?

Since there was no subject in the sentence, this was an ambiguous statement and a restrained one. Chen didn't pay much attention. Simply nodded or shook

his head in what he considered the appropriate places.

“During this period Chen Yaomei has raised her political level to some extent. However”

Chen knew this “however” meant that the gist was now coming. He stopped mopping his face and pulled himself together to listen carefully.

Just at this point Yaomei happened to come back. She showed no more surprise at the sight of her teacher than if she had been a blue thermos flask. “Good evening, Teacher Li.” After greeting her politely she sat down on a nearby cot. It didn’t occur to her that her presence might inhibit them.

“What brings you back today?” her father asked, hinting that she should leave the room.

“Why shouldn’t I come back?” she retorted laughingly. When it came to an argument he was no match for her. She could see that he didn’t really want her to leave and, knowing that he couldn’t stand her teacher, she switched on the TV.

Channel One showed a talk on political economy. “. . . Changing goods into commodities is called selling; changing commodities into goods is buying” The speaker had on a grey western suit. Perhaps a chicken tendon had stuck between his right molars. After every sentence his tongue probed his lower right gums in search of it. How could he fish it out with his tongue? But in front of a mass audience he didn’t like to pick his teeth with his fingers.

The chicken tendon made him uncomfortable, also affecting his thinking and his delivery.

Yaomei’s right molars started aching too. She ran her tongue over her teeth, poking about at random. She wished she had a toothpick as big as a poker and could jump into the TV set to jab hard at the cracks between the lecturer’s teeth.

Annoyed that nothing had stuck between her teeth, she stood up to turn on Channels Two to Eight. All of them showed the same man.

When she tried Channel One again the speaker had changed.

This was an impressive and resplendent figure, obviously favoured by fortune. Not the sort to be plagued by chicken tendons.

“. . . It should be evident that effective steps have been taken to rectify our Party’s style. Yet some comrades refuse to face facts. Recently the son of the Party secretary of C City was executed. What did these people say? They said, ‘The papers haven’t identified the body, so maybe a scapegoat was put in his place’”

“Quite right, it’s easy to find a scapegoat,” said Yaomei. She liked commenting on what was said on TV. Either taking up some statement or answering some question in advance—and she never missed the mark. Her off-the-cuff opinions always hit the nail on the head, so that her father didn’t know whether he should listen to the TV or to her.

Teacher Li kept darting anxious significant glances at Chen.

“. . . Who says our Party’s prestige has slumped? If it had, could we have exercised such an international influence?” the resplendent figure continued.

Yaomei started laughing shrilly. Laughed till her stomach ached. “Who can tell what international influence, if any, our Party has? No one’s gone abroad to find

out, so how can they prove it?"

"What way is that to talk, Chen Yaomei? How could the TV lie?" Teacher Li had great respect for that resplendent speaker.

Chen Yaomei had spoken of going abroad. Right, the question of going abroad.

Apart from students studying abroad at their own expense, tourists, people visiting relatives, or big shots and people with powerful connections, virtually all those qualified to go abroad were heroes or model workers. Though for years "slavish respect for everything foreign" had come under fire—was still coming under fire—a trip abroad remained a kind of prize for being progressive. A kind of political perk. Officials who had never been out of the country insisted on being sent out before their retirement. It was rather like the back-pay and the restoration of Party membership after the ten years of turmoil. In other words, not allowing someone to go out or cancelling his trip was often a punishment for making "political mistakes".

So as far as going abroad was concerned, Teacher Li didn't simply take into account such material advantages as bringing back a duty-free fridge or TV set. The political implications were more important. If you forged ahead politically, the material things would follow naturally.

"What do a few lies on TV matter? They can be swallowed, digested and excreted. Or follow people when they doze off to sink into oblivion. Do you think they're all that important, or able to do great damage? Besides, I never said that he was lying, just that we couldn't be sure he was telling the truth. Because the vast majority of Chinese have no chance to see the world, not even one foreign country, to investigate."

"All right, let's change the subject." Teacher Li wasn't used to speaking without preparation or standardized answers.

"You raised the subject, not I." Yaomei stood up again and went over to the TV. She kept switching channels as she said, "Let's try another channel." Her manner was that of a man touting for a peep-show. "Walk up and have a look: ten cents for a girl in her bath" She switched on Channels Two to Eight in turn, but all of them showed the same resplendent figure.

"Go to the kitchen, Yaomei, and see if Mum needs any help," Chen urged his daughter.

"OK." With a mocking glance at him she went into the kitchen.

"See how it is. Recently her ideas have struck me as rather unsound. For instance"

Yaomei came in again with chopsticks and a dish. "Mum doesn't need me, and the kitchen's so small I'm only in the way there."

Where wouldn't this girl be in the way? Teacher Li wondered.

Yaomei pulled out a folding table by the wall, and with one foot yanked out its legs so that it stood steadily in the middle of the floor. At once this round table nearly a metre across appeared to occupy the whole space, which had seemed quite roomy before.

Teacher Li's belly set up an embarrassing rumbling. Rumbled so loudly that Chen sitting opposite heard it.

She'd cycled a dozen kilometres and her supper time was overdue. She was hungry.

"Do share our simple meal with us, Teacher Li."

"No, no, thank you. I ate before I came."

"You mean lunch?"

"Supper, supper."

Yaomei's lips puckered in a smile and she didn't insist. She knew the teacher would refuse. Even pressing her mouth to a rice bowl would be no use.

"Since you've come home, Chen Yaomei, you can listen too. My views may not be correct, but you can consider them."

"If you think they may not be correct, why state them?"

?! After a second's dismay Teacher Li persevered, "I think the most important thing for you as a student is to study hard, to qualify yourself to make a contribution to society"

"I get five³ in all subjects."

"Of course that's very good. But can't you do even better?"

She didn't specify how. Unless they started making six the top grade, thought Yaomei.

"Do you still advocate students burying themselves in the classics, oblivious of the outside world? Don't you think the more people concern themselves with state affairs the better it is for the nation? Don't you think it the duty of a good citizen to watch out for poverty, injustice, malpractices, bribery and corruption and to battle to the end against all abuses? Chairman Mao urged us to pay attention to great affairs of state. You can't negate all his teachings just because he had his faults. We can't be such pragmatists."

"The Party and government will attend to such things. Are we greater than the Party? More enlightened? More correct? More capable? That brings us back to your old problem: don't set yourself up as a saviour. You're still young, Chen Yaomei, and politically immature. Be careful you don't make mistakes. Once you've made a political mistake you can never succeed in life. This is what I came to discuss with your father, out of concern for your political progress."

Such talk sounded so familiar, Chen Liansheng felt he had heard it all before.

He cast his mind back several decades to the eve of Liberation, when he had joined his college underground movement. Their dean had harped on the same theme: "The duty of students is to study hard. The country's affairs can be left to the government. They're not your business!"

He had lost faith in his own judgement. His brain seemed split again into two halves engaged in an endless dispute.

He thought it strange the way each time Teacher Li came she held forth non-stop. Surely there was a limit to what could be said on any single subject. Chairman Mao's *Selected Works* came to only five volumes, Lenin's to only four, *The Complete Works of Marx and Engels* to only fifty.

³The highest grade.

“Did you want to tell my father about Mr Norman’s lecture?” asked Yaomei. “I’ve already told him.”

“That’s good then.” Her teacher turned to Chen. “What’s your opinion?”

“I don’t think it’s important. Foreigners are forever running us down, yet some of us are afraid even to fart. Do you listen to foreign broadcasts? You should. They make such a point of pulling us to pieces, what does it matter if we criticize them? Yaomei’s views don’t represent the Party or state. How can a nonentity like her affect our foreign relations?”

Teacher Li could hardly believe that it was a communist talking. But Chen Yaomei’s dossier stated that her father was a Party member.

The policy of opening up meant opening up the economy, not ideology. Talk of opening up didn’t mean there were no restrictions, that all bans could be lifted. It was because of the widespread misunderstanding about this that so many wrong trends had surfaced. And these were inevitably reflected in their college. Living in a family like this, how could Chen Yaomei help being politically muddled?

Teacher Li rated high among her colleagues in institutions of higher education as a model class teacher, one of the most progressive. She hadn’t achieved this by sucking up to superiors, trimming her sails to the wind, or talking sweetly while doing down decent people. She’d achieved it by hard work. For instance she’d come to the Chens’ place at least five times, cycling all the way from the southeast corner of town to the northwest. For a woman of nearly fifty, if the weather turned windy or rainy, it was hard. She’d often nearly been knocked down by a bus. Even if you observed the traffic regulations, sooner or later you’d be involved in a crash.

Or take today. Her stomach was rumbling, she was faint with hunger. By the time she left, the restaurants and groceries would have closed. She wouldn’t be able to buy so much as a bun. “Changing commodities for goods is called buying.” She’d have to cycle right across town again. She’d love to have supper here. Steamed bread with scallions, shredded pork fried with pickles, noodles with egg soup . . . it was all laid out on the table. But if she touched a bite, what would become of her reputation as “incorruptible”?

She knew quite well that the students didn’t respect her. They simply humoured her, saying what she wanted to hear. Because if the comments on their graduation certificates were unfavourable, they’d never get a good job or be promoted, much less able to join the Party or go abroad. They’d have to go where conditions were toughest. There weren’t many others like Chen Yaomei, who didn’t despise her though she was always arguing with her. Although there was pity mixed with her respect.

Ah, how hard it was to make a reputation for oneself as a progressive.

But this was the only way for a teacher with no special qualifications to hope to get ahead. She’d never make it to associate professor, let alone professor. How many people like her were there in all China? After all there was only one Professor of Moral Education in the whole country.

If she didn’t go all out in this way she’d be no better off than her younger brother who taught middle school. During the winter and summer holidays he went to the station with a pedicab to pick up fares and luggage. Or sold dumplings

in the free market. "Changing goods into commodities, that's selling." Even in his dreams he'd call out, "Come and buy, come and buy, pork and cabbage dumplings, piping hot!" He used to wake up the whole family. Set them all worrying about his dumplings. Had he put in too much baking powder? Or too little? How could they go on like this year in year out?

Once her brother set up his stall next to that of one of his former students. The student said to him, "Teacher, in school you kept criticizing me and warning me, if I didn't work hard, I wouldn't get into college. But now aren't you selling dumplings here with me?"

Such was the fate of a Chinese intellectual!

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