

**Zhang Yihe, *Red Peonies: Two Novellas of China*, edited by Frank Stewart; translated by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping (University of Hawai'i Press, 2017)**

In 1970, 28-year-old Zhang Yihe (b. 1942) was studying literature at the Chinese Opera University when she authored the combustible and life-altering remark that would warrant her two-decade incarceration as a convicted counterrevolutionary: 'When someone climbs to the top, all of that person's friends and relatives get there, too' (vii). Seemingly harmless, Yihe's comment caused Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing, to take offence, presumably because rather than abject self-effacement, Yihe's remark confidently alluded to social mobility.

Yihe's *Red Peonies: Two Novellas of China* poignantly recollects her experiences befriending inmates in a remote women's labour prison under the despotic rule of Chairman Mao. Presenting the first English translation of Yihe's inaugural novellas, *The Woman Liu* and *The Woman Yang*, this edition will ultimately comprise a collection of ten stories. The novellas cannot be read apart from context provided in a 2017 interview, during which Yihe stated: 'I always believed that in order for China to walk a better path it would be necessary to reach the right historical judgement. In this case, it's the eradication of Mao's ideology.'<sup>1</sup> Central to this process of eradication is recording and preserving the narratives of those who suffered, and perished, in Mao's penal system.

In *The Woman Liu*, Yihe chronicles the life story of prisoner Liu Yueying, a fragile woman with a violent past. Yihe's prison stature changes considerably at the time of the 'year-end program' during which 'each prisoner had to write a report summing up her efforts to reform herself over the past year', of which a humbly penitent self-assessment could inspire government clemency and possibly reduce sentences (23). Illiteracy is not uncommon in the prison, and Yihe learns that her university education is an enviable commodity. She agrees, not without a degree of harmless self-interest, to help prisoner Liu Yueying write her reform narrative: 'I liked to help prisoners write their summaries because this offered the only opportunity to talk with others and to feel that my life was somewhat normal' (24). Now ordained the prison's impromptu oral historian, Yihe chronicles the haunting autobiographical accounts of an otherwise voiceless population of woman prisoners.

Scarcely content with her life's mundane domestic routines, Liu births a son who distracts her from her arranged, servile, and loveless marriage. When her husband is suddenly diagnosed with incurable epilepsy, Liu's life becomes unbearably claustrophobic, as she is required to care for a boorish man whose disturbing paroxysms grow increasingly severe. The pivotal episode comes at a cinema when her husband, succumbing publicly to an epileptic fit, is abandoned to the aid of strangers by Liu, who furiously flees the theatre in humiliation. Repugnance drives Liu to strangle her husband during the next seizure and, following a grisly dismemberment, she prepares a human kimchee of his remains.

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Lau, 'Zhang Yihe on CCP Atonement,' *Modern Chinese Culture and Literature Resource Center*, The Ohio State University, 5 April 2017.

As a sensitive chronicler, Yihe carefully avoids playing the role of an overweening therapist, eager to diagnose or glibly simplify the complexities of Liu's past. Rather, she is concerned how dissonant social forces – such as modernisation, political suppression, and vestiges of feudal orthodoxies (arranged marriage and patriarchy, for example) – might compel someone to rebel barbarically against these pressures. Yihe, although admitting no excuse for Liu's violent outburst, sympathetically reads her behaviour, at least partially, within a specific social context: 'People became demoralized because of poverty, degenerate because of grievances, and foolish because of ignorance. [...] I didn't know why male prisoners committed crimes, but it seemed to me that women prisoners were usually motivated by dissatisfaction' (34). In the story's concluding events, following a botched reconciliation with her estranged son, the ageing Liu quietly acknowledges that her final home and resting place is the prison.

Among the pages of her novellas, Yihe features the photography of Chinese artist, Xing Danwen (b. 1967), whose work dwells eerily on themes of urban loneliness, anonymity, isolation, and technological waste. Images, such as 'disDONNEXION, Images A14, B4, A5', 2002–2003' (62, 70, 71), depict heaps of tangled phone wires, cellphone chargers, and knotted chords, hinting to a lonely substratum of human existence despite the ubiquity of technologies that sustain global connectivity. Danwen also portrays isolated women in high-rise condominiums and vacuous corporate environments. 'Urban Fiction, Image 17 (and Detail), 2004' (92, 93), depicts a business woman, atop a towering building, poised in suicidal yearning. Providing powerful graphic counterpoints to Yihe's narratives, Danwen's work draws attention to the isolation of women in a globalised world.

Yihe's second novella, *The Woman Yang*, chronicles another prisoner's narrative, detailing the violent consequences of a thwarted marriage of a young Chinese couple, Yang Fenfang and Ho Wuji. Preventing Hu from proposing to Yang is his lowly social status as a landlord's son. While Yang and Ho begin a clandestine romance, her sister and brother-in-law pursue Captain Liu Qingsheng as an eligible match. They arrange for the two to meet and, during an awkward double-date luncheon, Yang notes with distaste the Captain's ungainly and stiff military demeanour. Eager to settle the young girl into marriage, her sister and brother-in-law's matchmaking chicanery persuades Yang to accompany Liu on a visit to Shanghai. Upon arriving, Yang learns that Liu holds an authentic marriage license 'with an official red seal' (119). The provincial Yang, though, is quickly dazzled by Shanghai's glimmering opulence and bustle. Liu pampers Yang, going so far as selecting her lingerie, an unknown commodity for a country girl: 'She was startled: the bra could actually alter the lines of her body. Even her posture changed: she was more erect than she had ever been and appeared taller. She also looked more attractive than before' (120). Candies, restaurant delicacies, and brassieres number among the wares Liu uses to obscure Yang's judgment. A wedding at the Shanghai barracks looms inevitably as the trip comes to an end and, quarrelling internally, Yang reflects, 'She should stop being naïve and come to terms with reality. For a comfortable life, one needs material goods' (124). That wedding night, Yang 'endured his onslaught like a corpse' (126).

Returning home a disillusioned married woman only intensifies Yang's trysts with Ho. One night, Ho's jealousy drives him to spy on the married couple at their home, where he witnesses the husband's perverted coercions and cruel sexual degradation of Yang. A fight ensues, and Ho stabs Liu. While Liu survives the attack, Yang is imprisoned and Ho is executed. The second half of Yang's story concerns her time in a women's prison, coping with the loss of Ho, the hardships of incarceration, and the sexual abuse she endures as a voiceless subject of China's corrupt penal system.

Reifying Yihe's otherwise ghostly prison counterparts is, ultimately, the solidifying and shaping power of memory, an effort to grasp meaning, if not perfect cohesion, from lived experience no matter how traumatic. The stories are at their best when, ephemerally glimpsed, Yihe draws our attention to instances that frame the women of her past in common humanity – a beautifully plaited braid, a smile, a resonant laugh. Guard Deng, writes Yihe, 'loved to laugh and when she did, dimples appeared in her cheeks' (25). For these women, guards and prisoners alike, are far from broken hostages of penal cruelty, but humans aglow with singularity, even hope.

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