

THE MOST ABSTRACT PARAGRAPHS

Screenplay by
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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?

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 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 muckracking 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 the death of 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 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