Self-Deception and Self-Knowledge in Yang Jiang’s Fiction

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As late as 1983, Howard Goldblatt could write that Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang had a “tacitly understood division of labor,” with Qian writing fiction and general literary criticism, while Yang specialized in drama, translation, and critical essays on specific authors. Yang was seventy-two when Goldblatt wrote those words, so he could be excused for assuming that the situation would not change greatly. But in fact, a thirty-year career in fiction and memoir still lay ahead for Yang, while after 1949, Qian never again wrote fiction.

Since each author published only one novel, and both works describe the travails of Chinese intellectuals, it has always been tempting to see them as “sister works” (jiemei pian 姐妹篇). It has even been said that Taking a Bath (Xizao 洗澡, 1987) could be viewed as a sort of sequel to Fortress Besieged (Weicheng 围城, serialized 1946–1947), suggesting the possible fates of Qian’s characters after 1949. But such observations elide the salient stylistic differences between the two writers’ oeuvres, and also fail to address their thematic common ground.

Striking in the fictional works of both writers—from their earliest stories to the novel Yang published at age seventy-five—is their affinity for the conventions of the British eighteenth-century novel. By this I mean that they share the conviction that the purposes of prose fiction are to show the world as it is, to unveil human follies, deceptions and self-deceptions, and, by holding up a mirror to these defects, to encourage self-examination and self-reform. Qian’s fictions dwell most on the exposure phase, while Yang, especially in her later works, came to concentrate more and more on the individual’s capacity for self-refinement—the only thing, she claims in her preface to the second

1 Howard Goldblatt, “Introduction,” in Yang, Six Chapters from my Life ‘Downunder’, xii.
2 An interpretation put forward by, among others, Yang’s authorized biographer, Wu Xuezhao, although she rightly points out the discrepancies. See: Wu, Ting Yang Jiang tan wangshi, 358.
3 See, Kong, Qian Zhongshu yu Yang Jiang, 319.
edition of *Taking a Bath*, that separates human beings from beasts. And since this self-refinement is meaningless if not voluntary, politically-coerced introspection is only a parody of the genuine article.

The differences in the two writers’ fictional oeuvre may be partly attributed to the very chronological fissure that deceived Goldblatt. Qian’s fictions are a young man’s work, with a dazzling surface of wit and satire. He does not attempt to penetrate his characters’ souls, nor does he show much sympathy for any of them, though it could be argued that the closing chapters of *Fortress Besieged* pre-shadow a change in perspective to a darker and more psychological approach. We cannot know what types of fiction he might have written in later years. Yang Jiang’s most successful works of fiction, on the other hand, were written late in life. Maturity and experience may have inspired the compassion with which she balances her ever-present satire.

In this chapter, I first discuss Yang Jiang’s perception of eighteenth-century British theories of fiction, and then, following a survey of her early stories, analyze how she applied those principles in her later works, especially the novel *Taking a Bath*. I also examine how Yang incorporated the highly politicized environment in which she lived and wrote into her works, most notably *Taking a Bath* and *Six Chapters of Life in a Cadre School* (*Ganxiao liu ji* 干校六記, 1981), and consider how she viewed those experiences in the light of her literary principles.

Yang Jiang’s affinity for the eighteenth century is clear both from the authors she chose to study as an academic researcher and from her own literary works, with their cool eye for human foibles and deceit, their admiration for judgment and honesty, their goals of self-reform through self-knowledge. Several of the critical essays Yang Jiang published in 1979 and 1986, particularly those on Fielding and Austen, provide insights into her views on the purpose and accomplishments of fiction.

“Henry Fielding’s Theory of Fiction” was first published in 1957 during the Hundred Flowers Movement, a brief period during which the Communist Party relaxed its cultural policies to allow a greater variety of expression. Although Yang mentions in the first few lines that Marx liked Fielding’s novels, her essay makes no further nod to socialist realism. She ignores the perennial themes of

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4 Yaohua Shi and I translated the title of the novel as *Baptism*. Yang, *Baptism*, xiii. Unless otherwise noted, all page references are to this edition.

5 Yang Jiang, “Fei’erding guanyu xiaoshuo de lilun” 菲爾丁關於小說的理論 (Henry Fielding’s Theory of Fiction), in *YWJ*, vol. 4, 236–266. Originally published as: “Fei’erding zai xiaoshuo fangmian de lilun he shijian” 菲爾丁在小說方面的理論和實踐 (Theory and Practice in Henry Fielding’s Fiction), in *Wenxue yanjiu* 文學研究 (Literary Research) 2 (1957), 107–47.