CHAPTER 7

The Institutional Mindset: Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang on Marriage and the Academy

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A lecturer is like a maid, a professor is like a wife, and as for an associate professor, he’s no more than a concubine. . . . For a maid to become a concubine is quite common . . . but for a concubine to gain legitimate status as a wife goes against all moral principles and obligations. It just can’t be done.

—QIAN ZHONGSHU, Fortress Besieged

If, for most of us, marriage is supposed to be a “fortress besieged”—a battle of conflicting impulses to conquer and to flee—the same is rarely said of Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang, whose marriage lasted sixty-three years, from 1935 until Qian’s death in 1998. Since then, Yang has actively managed Qian’s literary estate and continued to write about their life together, and, to a lesser extent, with their daughter Qian Yuan, who died in 1997. Qian Zhongshu mostly let his writings speak for themselves; Yang Jiang, in contrast, has made extensive efforts to place her and her husband’s within a context different from solo creative and academic labor: quotidien family life. Yang’s story of her marriage with Qian is of a harmonious, affectionate, and even romantic intellectual partnership. Her biographical and autobiographical writings could be said to have retroactively domesticated the famous couple, making their private life public, and in doing so dramatically re-shaping public appreciation of them and their works.2

1 Qian, Fortress Besieged, 267. Page numbers for subsequent quotations appear in-text. A similar comment appears earlier in the narrative. When Fang Hongjian and his companions reach Sanlü University, they discover that chairmanship of the Department of Chinese Literature, which had been promised to Li Meiting, has been snatched away by an earlier arrival. The narrator comments: “Being a department chairman is just like getting married: ‘The one installed three days earlier becomes the wife.’ The [welcoming] party for Li turned out to be more like the new concubine’s First Meeting ceremony than a reception” (196).

2 For a genealogy of women’s autobiographical writing and the problematic of gendered subjectivity in twentieth-century China’s literary field see especially Wendy Larson’s Women and Writing in Modern China, Jing Wang’s When ‘I’ Was Born, Lingzhen Wang’s Personal Matters,
Marriage and the academy loom large in Qian’s and Yang’s writings as intertwined institutions. The academy, in a general sense, refers to the workspace of the intellectual, the place of scholarship, research, and teaching. In physical terms, it comprises such socially-acknowledged sources and seats of learning as schools, universities, research institutes, libraries, and archives. But the academy is also an institution in that, like marriage, it operates according to conventions, habits, and expected patterns of behavior. As an institution, each represents both a set of material realities and a theoretical or imaginary construct.

In this chapter I analyze Yang and Qian as a pair, rather than as individual creative forces or auteurs. Biographers have, inevitably, written of the pair as being “inseparable.” Critics have also noted similarities between their works, not least the humorous and satirical skepticism with which they appraise their fellow human beings—intellectuals in particular. Below, I examine how the style and themes of their writings bears upon their claims—both implicit and explicit—of literary values. I identify and analyze a quality endemic to their works that I call an “institutional mindset.” Qian and Yang were both interested in, even obsessed with, how being a member of a marriage or an academic organization impacts the individual. They also wrote much about the idea of marriage and the academy as objects of desire, fear, admiration, and loathing; and as institutions of refuge and entrapment. They share a fascination with the problems of these institutions as constructs of human society. This, I argue, represents one way that these two writers avoided falling prey to the “obsession with China” that ensnared so many of their peers. The domesticated intellectual, who struggles with and sometimes succumbs to the twin pressures of these institutions, I further argue, is emblematic of their vision of cosmopolitanism and its limits.

Marriage and the academy are both institutions in that they are governed by societal expectations, or norms. Biographically and literarily, they are perhaps

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3 This claim appears, for example, in the last line of Wu Xuezhao’s biography of Yang: Wu, Ting Yang Jiang tan wangshi. Several joint biographies of the couple also exist.

4 The latter phrase refers to C.T. Hsia’s famous diagnosis of a common obsession with the fate of the nation shared by many modern Chinese writers of the first half of the twentieth century. While Hsia makes only passing mention of Yang Jiang in his book, Qian Zhongshu, along with Eileen Chang, is one of his most notable examples of a writer who bucked this trend.