CHAPTER 8

“All Alone, I Think Back on We Three”: Yang Jiang’s New Intimate Public

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Reading books can help one understand life circumstances different from one’s own. Anyone reading of the life trajectories in We Three will be deeply touched, and perhaps even moved to tears.

—Literary critic Cao Wuwei, 2004

Liu Meizhu: What kind of people do you like best?
Yang Jiang: All people, whatever their age or social position. All people are kind.
Liu: And which do you hate the most?
Yang: Those who hate me. I hate them too.

—Yang Jiang, interviewed by Liu Meizhu, 2005

At the beginning of the 21st century, Yang Jiang was already well known for her varied literary career. She had been a playwright in the 1940s, a translator and essayist during the Mao years, an author of fiction and memoirs through the 1980s. But in 2003, her fame escalated to a new level with her bestselling memoir We Three (Women sa 我們仨). The book chronicles her life with her husband and daughter and the experience of losing them to illness in 1998 and 1997. At one point in her reconstruction of their life together she states:

“We Three” were in truth most ordinary. What family does not have a husband, a wife, and children? At the very least there is the husband and the wife—add on the children, and it becomes “we three” or “four” or “five,” and so on. It’s just a matter of each family having its own way, that’s all. This family of ours was very plain. We three were very pure. We weren’t ambitious, and we weren’t competitive. All we wanted was to stay together, and to protect each other, each working according to his or her

1 Cao, “Du Women sa” (On We Three).
2 Liu, “Interviews with Yang Jiang.”
3 Yang, Women sa (We Three), in JWJ, vol. 3, 115–261.
abilities. When we met with hard times, Zhongshu and faced it together, and then hard times weren’t hard. And with Ah Yuan there as our help and our companion, no matter how terrible things got, they would always be fine again.4

Yang Jiang’s voice in this and other writings from the latest, ongoing period of her career makes a direct appeal to her audience that constitutes an intimate public in the sense that Lauren Berlant has defined the term to track a phenomenon in American culture:

What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience. A certain circularity structures an intimate public, therefore: its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging—partly through participation in the relevant commodity culture, and partly because of its revelations about how people can live.5

As Berlant goes on to say, these revelations amount to emotional contact, “of a sort.” What interests Berlant is what she calls the “juxtapolitical” nature of public intimacy, the manifestation of a literary and cultural style that “thrives in proximity to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and recalibration as achievement enough.” (9) In what follows, I will argue that Yang Jiang’s post-1999 life writing—only this relatively new term can encompass the broad array of memoir, autobiography, letters, essays and ephemera centered on her family’s life—suggests the existence of an intimate public centered on China’s literary cosmopolitans. Accounts of how intellectuals like Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang lived, loved and struggled through the years of the revolution have gradually become common ground for a wide variety of Chinese readers seeking a way to be Chinese through a sensual and emotional experience of the history of the revolution. In Yang Jiang’s hands, the life of Qian Zhongshu in

4 Ibid., 175.
5 Berlant, The Female Complaint, 6-7.