

## Women as Sources of Redemption in Chang Hsien-liang's Labor-Camp Fiction

Chang Hsien-liang's 張賢亮 three novellas about labor-camp life—*Passionate Words from a Village Gulag* (*T'u-lao ch'ing-hua* 土牢情話, written in 1981), *Mimosa* (*Lü-hua shu* 綠化樹, 1984), and *Half of Man Is Woman* (*Nan-jen te i-pan shih nü-jen* 男人的一半是女人, 1985)—exhibit remarkable similarity in plot design, characterization, motifs, and narrative voice.<sup>1</sup> Each describes labor-camp life in northwestern China during the 1960s and 1970s and involves a love affair between an obscure young intellectual of urban background and a working-class woman of rural background. Taken together, they read like a semiautobiographical or even confessional *Bildungsroman*. A recurrent theme in the novellas is the intellectual's yearning for redemption of his body and intellect through contact with the earthy heroine.

However intriguing the heroes, or authorial alter-egos, may be, the heroines receive sensitive portrayals of a different sort; they are just as likely to captivate the reader. The author Chang Hsien-liang has been accused of being a male chauvinist. That criticism aside, in some respects his writings regard certain types of women highly. Once, when praising the female workers who persevere despite hardships, he used an analogy to hardy dandelions: "Though scattered apart by the ruthless wind, as long as [the seeds] fall to the ground, they'll soon strike roots, sprout, and bloom. They might not boast of seductive beauty, nor do they show themselves off; but this green mass brings the abundance of spring to the earth. Couldn't we, the better-educated intellectuals, equipped with subtle feelings and who happened to be suffering in adversity at that time, draw spiritual strength from them?"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> They are collected in *Chang Hsien-liang chi* 張賢亮集 (Foochow: Hai-hsia wen-i ch'u-pan-she, 1986), pp. 1-75, 216-384, 385-592, respectively. All page references are to this edition. *Lü-hua shu* and *Nan-jen te i-pan shih nü-jen* have been translated into English. See *Mimosa*, trans. Gladys Yang (Peking: Panda Books, 1985), and *Half of Man Is Woman*, trans. Martha Avery (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Chang Hsien-liang, "Hsin-ling ho jou-t'i te pien-hua" 心靈和肉體的變化 ("On the Transformation of Mind and Body"), in *Chang Hsien-liang hsüan-chi* 張賢亮選集 (Tientsin: Pai-hua wen-i ch'u-pan-she, 1985), vol. 1, p. 199.

With some grades of variation, Chang's particular type of woman in the novellas usually possesses the following qualities:

1. she is physically strong and capable of hard labor;
2. she is mentally wholesome, has a tenacious will to live, and is optimistic about life;
3. is industrious, pragmatic, and good at tending the hearth and home;
4. makes herself economically useful and can usually work her way to an improved standard of living;
5. is a product of the oral culture and is often illiterate or semiliterate;
6. sticks to basic moral principles and is honest, straightforward, and chaste;
7. although somewhat simple-minded, nevertheless has a pleasant personality, is contented and affectionate;
8. and politically speaking, because she comes from the lower-middle peasant class she belongs to the good "red" category, a category ensuring the presence of pure, non-bourgeois blood.

By contrast, the intellectual hero has the following traits:

1. he is often a sickly convict;
2. he is condemned basically because he hails from a bourgeois family;
3. enjoys little freedom, having been branded a rightist and put in a forced-labor brigade;
4. his past upbringing has enabled him to appreciate cultural refinement, but prison-camp life has made him physically unsound and mentally unstable;
5. is morose, indecisive, and mistrustful of people and fearful of authority;
6. at times, he can also seize opportunities to attack in order to release his pent-up anger, thereby enjoying some measure of revenge;
7. and clashes with his rival in love, who is usually a physically strong man from the same class background as the heroine, a cadre or even his immediate supervisor, toward whom he feels a mixture of envy and contempt.

The story of *Passionate Words from a Village Gulag* begins with a bleak scene. Ten prisoners are stranded in a locked barracks during a flood, abandoned by their fleeing guards and deprived of water and food.<sup>3</sup> Fear of

death has brought out the worst in everybody: during this abnormal crisis the narrator-protagonist Shih Tsai 石在 witnesses the beastly depravity and cruelty of which humans are capable when threatened by death. Instead of trying to deal with the disaster through cooperation, people lash at one another with violent outbursts. Panic stricken, Shih Tsai even curses his beloved mother.<sup>4</sup>

The characters in the story are not criminals, but have been imprisoned mostly for ideological reasons. The young intellectual Shih Tsai has been jailed for writing a poetic eulogy to humanitarianism. Sung Cheng 宋征, Shih Tsai's fellow inmate and formerly a local party boss—an ideologically unimpeachable Mao-worshipper—is accused of "confounding class boundaries" by having treated his subordinates fairly and having refused to toady to the powerful.<sup>5</sup> When Sung dies under torture, the ruthless labor-camp commandant Liu Chün 劉俊, who harbors an intense hatred of the intellectuals, claims that Sung has died from appendicitis. After the flood is over, the prisoners, especially the three educated ones, begin to worry that Liu might want to exterminate the whole lot sooner or later in order to do away with the witnesses to his crime.

It is at this critical juncture that the heroine Ch'iao An-p'ing 喬安萍 enters the scene; she is a young and fairly inexperienced labor-camp guard from the local militia. To the male protagonist Shih, Ch'iao An-p'ing appears like an "angel" descending on his "hell" of a prison.<sup>6</sup> She is described as the very image of health, vitality, and perfection, bringing hope to the moribund prisoners. During her guard duties, Ch'iao An-p'ing pays special attention to Shih Tsai and later falls in love with him. Persuaded by his prison mates, Shih Tsai takes advantage of her affection by asking her to send letters to Sung Cheng's wife, pretending that Mrs. Sung is his aunt. By informing Mrs. Sung of the real cause of her husband's death and appealing to her for immediate rescue, the prisoners finally escape Liu Chün's clutches. Ch'iao An-p'ing has unwittingly saved their lives.

Ch'iao influences Shih Tsai in many other important aspects. After the death of Shih's mother, she assumes a mother's role by filling up his emotional vacuum with abundant sympathy. She protects him and even gives him food as if he were a child. Despite his alleged crime, she trusts him whole-heartedly; his heroic rescue of Liu Chün's drowning wife convinces her of his basic goodness.

Aside from feeling gratitude for her love and sympathy, Shih Tsai is

<sup>3</sup> Chang, *Tu-lao ch'ing-hua*, pp. 5-12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-26, for Ch'iao's relationship with Shih.

attracted to Ch'iao because of her inborn gentleness, sensitivity, and grace, which differ so much from the male brutality surrounding him. He is, for instance, amazed that she can transform the mechanical and harsh movements of the "Maoist Loyalty Dance" (*chung-tzu wu* 忠字舞) into elegant, lilting movements. She awakens the feminine side of his being, reminding him of his childhood set in more humane social surroundings.

Though only semiliterate, Ch'iao An-p'ing respects culture, longs for further education, and thus admires Shih Tsai. To her mind he is the only person with some degree of culture amidst the crowd in the wilderness. However, unlike him, she has little capacity, and still less the background or the opportunity, for intellectual cultivation. Her ignorance and limitations are such that instead of pointing out her errors, Shih Tsai chooses to pamper her as if she were still a little girl. Their aesthetic tastes differ accordingly. The "Maoist Loyalty Dance" that Ch'iao regards as "terrific" seems to him a barbarous kind of battle dance.<sup>7</sup>

Despite all of his intellectual advantages, Shih Tsai is as naïve as Ch'iao in political matters. She, who is unaware of the nature and the severity of his crime, once suggests that he "perform meritorious service to atone" (*li-kung shu-tsui* 立功贖罪).<sup>8</sup> She also proposes that they run away together. Prompted by simpleminded and singleminded passion, she is more decisive and resourceful than he. By contrast, Shih's past political suffering has taught him about human treachery and made him suspicious and non-committal, even towards an honest and loving young woman. He is sometimes caustic in venting his personal grievances about labor-camp life on her.<sup>9</sup> Although innocent, he has been so brainwashed by the bloodline theory of class identity (*hsieh-t'ung lun* 血統論) that he believes he and his capitalist ancestors are essentially corrupt. He thus needs to atone for his supposed sins.<sup>10</sup>

At a struggle session the gullible hero is intimidated by the interrogation and led to believe that Ch'iao had already betrayed him by confessing the true nature of their relationship. He then reveals her secret plan for their escape from camp,<sup>11</sup> thereby inadvertently betraying her. At the appointed time when she tries to steal the keys from the guard Wang Fu-hai 王富海, she is raped by commandant Liu Chün. Later she attempts suicide without success and is forced to marry the uncouth Wang Fu-hai.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42, for these cultural and intellectual differences.      <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>10</sup> See Chang Hsien-liang's comment on the bloodline theory in "Ts'ung K'u-t'u-tso-fu te tu-yen ho Na-erh-hsün te tuan-pi c'an-ch'i Ling yü jou chih-wai te hua" 從庫圖佐夫的獨眼和納爾遜的斷臂談起靈與肉之外的話, in *Chang hsüan-chi*, vol. 1, p. 183.

<sup>11</sup> Chang, *T'u-lao ch'ing-hua*, p. 66-67.

Ch'iao is naïve about men. She is unaware of the extremes of their violent lust and is unprepared for such indecency. Himself ignorant about women and love, Shih Tsai originally regards Ch'iao as a hunter and instinctively tries to hide.<sup>12</sup> Both are inexperienced in love, and this shows in their sharply differing attitudes. Ch'iao is ready to sacrifice herself for him, but Shih Tsai is engrossed in stratagems to preserve his own survival. At first he is too busy just keeping himself alive to think of love. Having long since learned to mistrust everyone in the labor camp, he even suspects her motives, wondering if the leaders are using her to trap him.<sup>13</sup> Even when he is finally convinced of her love, a shadow of doubt remains at the back of his mind. His concern for self-interest and desire for lenient treatment are such that he ends up betraying her. By contrast, Ch'iao persists: she promises him, "I'll keep sending you food no matter how long you'll be stuck in prison."<sup>14</sup> She trusts him even when he has betrayed her; even after she is married to Wang Fu-hai, she tries to contact him and still feels love for him.<sup>15</sup> In this case, Ch'iao can be said to be unintentionally victimized by a man who is himself a victim of the political and social systems. *Passionale Words* thus establishes the paradigmatic scenario of a female worker and a young male intellectual in a labor camp who create a potentially fruitful bond, one which turns out, however, to be limited and frustrating.

The story in *Mimosa* begins in 1961 when the twenty-five-year-old hero Chang Yung-lin 章永璘 rejoices over his release from a prison camp and transfer to a state farm. But soon he realizes that despite his newly acquired freedom and the chance to "support himself with his own labor" (*tsu-shih ch'i-li* 自食其力),<sup>16</sup> he is still starving. Fortunately, a worker named Ma Ying-hua 馬櫻花, or Mimosa, takes pity on him; she feeds him, clothes him, shelters him, mothers him, and falls in love with him. By making him her frequent dinner guest, she arouses his yearning for the comfort and privacy of a home. Before his encounter with Ma Ying-hua, he is so starved and fatigued that he fears that he is hobbling toward an early death.<sup>17</sup> He has learned hooliganism in the labor camp and must strive constantly merely for survival. He is engaged daily in meaningless and trivial competitions in foraging and getting material comforts with a fellow inmate nicknamed "The Sales Department Manager" (*ying-yeh-fu chu-jen* 營業部主任); this inmate envies and hates Chang for his bourgeois background. And despite Chang's uneasy conscience as he lies in bed at night, not a single workday passes without his indulging in all sorts of underhanded schemes to gain

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>16</sup> Chang, *Lü-hua shu*, p. 232.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

material advantages. Instead of remolding him into a model socialist man, the torture and male ruthlessness around him have only driven him further into depravity. Ma Ying-hua thus brings him hope for life. Only when he comes into contact with this honest, hard-working, and loving woman does he become painfully aware of the extent of his corruption, and hankers after transforming himself into something better. For the hero who feels deep guilt over his capitalist ancestors, possible union with the pure-blooded and spirited heroine provides him with hope for the future.

Unlike the virginal Ch'iao An-p'ing, Ma Ying-hua is a practical-minded mother of a two-year-old girl. Though nicknamed "American Hotel," courted by several men, and certainly aware of love and sex, she adheres to a personal code of chastity. She is passionate and often speaks without mincing words. The first time she invites Chang over to her house and offers him food, she grows impatient at his hesitation to eat and flares up in anger.<sup>18</sup> But, like Ch'iao, the illiterate Ma is attracted to Chang because of his cultural upbringing; Chang's act of reading reminds her of the way her beloved grandfather would pore over scriptures. As Ch'iao did for Shih, she nourishes and protects Chang, and urges him to study instead of making love to her: passionate misadventures might "ruin his health."<sup>19</sup> When Chang proposes to her, she feels the time is not appropriate. For one thing, he is not yet economically independent, and for another, as an unmarried woman she receives gifts of food from bachelor suitors in her locale. But when he grows unsure of her loyalty toward him, she offers to sleep with him to prove her love.<sup>20</sup>

In these two novellas the recurrent motif of blood implies the heroine's willingness to sacrifice herself. In *Passionate Words*, Shih Tsai notices drops of blood on a window pane and later discovers that the back of Ch'iao's hand was cut by glass when she surreptitiously dropped food off for him.<sup>21</sup> Ch'iao insists on calling him "brother" and having him call her "sister," using the supposed primitive terms of address between man and wife in agricultural society; by doing so, she forms ties of blood (*hsieh-yuan* 血緣) with him.<sup>22</sup>

Ma Ying-hua's passionate expression, "Even if my head were chopped off, my blood-stained body would still stay with you,"<sup>23</sup> implies blood sacrifice. She also purifies Chang Yung-lin's blood with her selfless love. Chang feels that "her gem-like fingerprint has dissolved into my blood."<sup>24</sup> In a sense, the heroine has redeemed him through self-sacrifice.

Before Chang Yung-lin enters Ma Ying-hua's life, a middle-aged, handsome carter Hai Hsi-hsi 海喜喜 has been courting her. Both Hai and Ma come from the same class and culture; Hai is a Muslim, and like her belongs to a non-Han minority nationality.<sup>25</sup> They are such good singers that Chang Yung-lin is deeply stirred. Nevertheless, they are unconscious of the aesthetic pleasure they create for casual listeners. Although endowed with such talent in oral expression, they are illiterate. Having no concept of a "poet," Ma Ying-hua calls Chang a "singer." Hai Hsi-hsi mistakes the book Chang is reading for a religious tract. Both Ma and Hai find the classical poems Chang recites ridiculous and boring; however, being more imaginative, Ma Ying-hua enjoys listening to Chang's fairy tales, at which the more practical Hai Hsi-hsi jeers. Hai Hsi-hsi, like a noble savage, or a father figure, is both a model whom Chang emulates and a competitor.

Fascinated by the primitive strength in these workers, Chang desires to become one of them. When Ma Ying-hua adopts him much in the way a grown-up might adopt a child, part of him instinctively develops a childlike dependency on her, but another part remains skeptical. When he proves he is not a mere scholar but can work hard and fight back to protect himself, Ma Ying-hua exclaims happily, "You've become one of us!"<sup>26</sup> But he cannot help seeing the cultural gap between them. Having different ways of communication, they often talk past one another, or fail to grasp one another's feelings. Their vocabulary and manner of speech differ. Ma uses coarser, cruder language; she finds such refined wording as "my dear" ridiculous, and insists on Chang Yung-lin's calling her "my flesh."<sup>27</sup> Neither written words nor elegant manners exert any power over her. Thus, for all her love and the establishment of a certain amount of affinity, Chang cannot belong completely in her world.

After he has been fed and clothed, has become a civilized man, and returned to his "normal" state, Chang wants something more elegant and finds her ways of expressing love ridiculous.<sup>28</sup> An implicit pattern in Chang Hsien-liang's works is the thwarting of individual choice by fate. For a long time Chang Yung-lin cannot decide whether or not to marry Ma Ying-hua. But when Hai Hsi-hsi withdraws from competition for her favor, and team leader Hsieh 謝隊長 urges Chang to get married, Chang begins to feel ready to marry her. At this very juncture, due to the slander of his old rival the "Manager," he is suddenly transferred far away to a severely controlled work team called the "Gate of Hell," without hope of seeing her again.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 274.    <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 322.    <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 376.

<sup>21</sup> Chang, *T'u-lao ch'ing-hua*, pp. 39, 41.    <sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> Chang, *Lii-hua shu*, p. 377.    <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, *ibid.*, pp. 278, 365.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 317.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 345.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 344-45.

The contorted psychology of the hero, as well as the conflicts between the hero's and the heroine's cultural backgrounds and between the hero and his rival, resurface in *Half of Man Is Woman*. In the spring of 1967, Chang Yung-lin, aged thirty-one, has already been in the labor camps for ten years for having written "reactionary" poems. By chance, he is transferred to a rice field to supervise a work detail. While foraging for wild game, he sees a voluptuous woman bathing naked in a secluded area. The woman, Huang Hsiang-chiu 黃香久, turns out to be a labor-camp inmate charged with a "crime" related to extramarital sex. Although overcome by her beauty, Chang does not meet her, since her brigade moves north three days later.

When they happen to meet eight years later, Huang, now thirty-one, has been married and divorced twice, while Chang has been jailed twice during that time and is now herding sheep at a state farm. They become married, and Huang takes good care of Chang, often sacrificing her own needs. At the same time, however, she discovers his impotence and becomes increasingly frustrated. Then she commits adultery with party secretary Ts'ao Hsüeh-i 曹學義, a cadre who has long desired her. Though she feels contrite and tries hard to make up for it, Chang can neither forget nor forgive her infidelity.

One day a heavy rainstorm causes the waters from the mountains to come down in a flood, threatening to breach the canal bank and inundate the villages. Chang is the only person able to swim, and he volunteers to plunge into the waters to plug an opening in the bank—a crucial act that stops the flood. Thus, although Chang cannot actively avenge himself over Ts'ao Hsüeh-i, he wins a symbolic victory with his heroism during the flood. Having demonstrated superior intellectual and even physical abilities, he assumes control in place of Ts'ao and saves the whole village.

When Chang goes home cold and damp, Huang feeds him steaming ginger soup, massages his whole body, and puts his freezing face between her breasts. Sexually aroused, Chang makes love to her. Thus, along with his recovery of self-confidence through heroic achievements during the flood, he recovers his masculinity, much to his own surprise. However, unable to erase the bad memories and eager to participate in the political changes that are taking place in the outside world, he finds the marriage confining and, despite her entreaties, finally divorces her.

While Ch'iao An-p'ing and Ma Ying-hua seem to be relatively free agents from normal society who consort with an ousted hero, Huang Hsiang-chiu has gone through the same kind of suffering and experienced

the same sort of psychological distortion as Chang Yung-lin. As a female character, Huang Hsiang-chiu is less idealized than either Ch'iao An-p'ing or Ma Ying-hua, and she appears to be more sophisticated and more calculating about love.

The relationship between the hero and his rival-cum-father-figure also differs in *Mimosa* and *Half of Man*. In *Mimosa*, Chang Yung-lin once wins a fight with Hai Hsi-hsi, who surpasses Chang in physique if not in education. But Hai is portrayed as a type of worker whose kindness hides beneath an aloof or even hostile exterior. In the end, Chang is reconciled with Hai and is even touched by Hai's yielding Ma Ying-hua to him. In *Half of Man*, although the feeling of having vanquished his rival has significantly improved his relationship with the woman he loves, Chang Yung-lin still cowers under the controlling power of party secretary Ts'ao. The temporary victory over his rival aside, Chang Yung-lin has not felt confident enough to be on equal terms with Ts'ao, still less to be reconciled with him.

In these three novellas, the author Chang Hsien-liang deliberately associates the heroines with the benign side of nature, using plants and peaceful, noncarnivorous animals as metaphors and beautiful landscape as their backdrop. Taken as a whole, the descriptions reinforce an underlying motif of woman as a mother figure. This tranquil and more feminine world of nature contrasts with the petty rivalry and ruthless violence in the predominantly male human world. Shih Tsai dreams of flying with Ch'iao An-p'ing over black fog to a place where the sky is blue, the trees bloom, and green grass extends like a carpet.<sup>29</sup> On the night when Ch'iao is worried about his safety, her glittering eyes seem like "a pond in which wild ducks have been aroused from sleep."<sup>30</sup> In *Half of Man*, the recurrent image of flowing water is strongly associated with the female and with love. The sound of splashing, which Chang Yung-lin mistakes for the sound made by wild ducks, attracts his attention and leads him to Huang's secluded bathing place. The dream the narrator records in the preface begins with the rustling sound of the reeds and the trickling sound of the water in the ditch.<sup>31</sup> Huang Hsiang-chiu's association with Mother Nature is seen in such images as the ducks, the cat, other animals, water, plants, and the moon. When she tries to warm Chang's chilled face with her breasts, they are described as lotus-like, with red pistils, floating in the water—an image that reminds Chang of their first encounter in the midst of a natural world teeming with life.

The woman's fingers and hands, an immediate indication of physical

<sup>29</sup> Chang, *Tu-lao ch'ing-hua*, p. 71.      <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>31</sup> Chang, *Nan-jen*, pp. 386, 419, for water sounds.

labor in these novellas, seem to serve as a metaphor of gentle revitalization, as opposed to harsh ideological remolding. Ch'iao An-p'ing tries to rub fragrant lotion into Shih Tsai's scorched skin, stroking him gently with her hands.<sup>32</sup> While eating the steamed bun Ma Ying-hua gives him, Chang Yung-lin notices her fingerprint on it and feels extremely touched and grateful.<sup>33</sup> When Chang returns home after rescuing the village from flood, Huang rubs and kneads his arms and chest "as though they were noodle dough in her hands,"<sup>34</sup> until he becomes warm again. In a sense, recalling the Biblical story of Lazarus, to whom the ailing Chang Yung-lin once appeals for help,<sup>35</sup> the heroine heals him with her magic touch.

Aside from transforming the hero indirectly with physical labor, the heroine also nourishes him and gives him life with selfless, maternal love. For example, Ch'iao rescues Shih Tsai almost at the expense of her life; Ma Ying-hua saves Chang Yung-lin from starvation; and Huang Hsiang-chiu educates him in sex, helping him restore his lost potency. In one way or another, the creation of such figures may reflect the author's own search for a mother figure. In Chang Hsien-liang's most recent novel, *Getting Used to Dying* (*Hsi-kuan ssu-wang* 習慣死亡), the hero, a labor-camp survivor, is constantly reminded of his mother's fragrance by the scents from his lovers' bodies. Once he even admits to one of his lovers, "I wanted badly to use your body to return to that of my mother. I did not want to be reborn again simply to prolong my years."<sup>36</sup> He seeks to return to the womb through love-making.

As a mother figure, the heroine also attempts to protect the hero from his rival's taunts and attacks. In *Passionate Words*, Ch'iao An-p'ing would choose death rather than betray Shih Tsai to the commandant.<sup>37</sup> In *Mimosa*, Ma Ying-hua comes to Chang Yung-lin's rescue when Hai Hsi-hsi mocks him, and castigates Hai for his assault on Chang.<sup>38</sup> In *Half of Man*, even though Huang Hsiang-chiu once commits adultery with Ts'ao Hsüeh-i out of sexual frustration, her heart always belongs to Chang Yung-lin.<sup>39</sup> After Chang finds out about her adultery, she looks after him even more assiduously and deferentially, hoping to win back his love.

The idea of a nurturing earth-mother may reflect typical regional

politics and regional concerns. These heroines represent the rural China to which the author feels strong attachment and loyalty. As the narrator in *Mimosa* explains, Ma Ying-hua, the heroine's name, is also the name of a kind of tree which is "fond of light, can withstand aridity and poor soil," and has medicinal functions.<sup>40</sup> As suggested by its alias *li-hua shu* (mimosa, literally, the greening tree), Ma Ying-hua, the name shared by both the tree and the character, thus symbolizes the humble but enduring working-class people that make China green. It also suggests the author's wishful thinking that the "green masses" might cure and reinvigorate the sickly intellectuals. In *Half of Man*, the association of Huang Hsiang-chiu with the land can be seen in both her name and her description. Her name implies that "the yellow [earth] (or, the loess) has an enduring fragrance," while the narrator compares the rural landscape of northern China metaphorically and sensually to Huang's body in sentences like "The loamy plateau was as ripe as Hsiang-chiu's full breasts."<sup>41</sup> In *Getting Used to Dying*, the narrator-cum-writer finally, after several exciting love affairs at home and abroad, returns to his old love, a woman of rural background living in a village in northwestern China. This reveals his "patriotism," which issues partly from his attachment to rural China.

At the level of plot and reality, the love affairs in these three novellas are frustrated for a variety of reasons. First, the regime has routinely encouraged class hatred and suppressed spontaneous feelings and romantic sentiments. As a goddess-cum-mother figure, the heroine at one time or another inspires awe and worship in the hero, but such sentiments cannot survive in politically harsh environments.<sup>42</sup> In *Passionate Words*, a more sophisticated inmate warns Shih Tsai that at such an abnormal time in Chinese history he cannot afford to display "chivalry" toward women as he might otherwise have wished, nor can he "court women in a proper manner."<sup>43</sup> In *Mimosa*, Chang Yung-lin would have preferred to show his affection for Ma Ying-hua in a straightforward manner, but his inferior political and financial status forces him to rely on her and her suitors for alms. In *Half of Man*, Chang laments that romantic love among the inmates has long since been snuffed out

<sup>32</sup> Chang, *T'u-lao ch'ing-hua*, p. 37.      <sup>33</sup> Chang, *Lü-hua shu*, p. 276.

<sup>34</sup> Chang, *Nan-jeu*, p. 531; *Half of Man*, p. 201.      <sup>35</sup> Chang, *Lü-hua shu*, p. 254.

<sup>36</sup> Chang Hsien-liang, *Hsi-kuan ssu-wang* 習慣死亡 (Taipei: Yüan-shen ch'u-pan-she, 1989), p. 176; *Getting Used to Dying*, trans. Martha Avery (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 163.

<sup>37</sup> Chang, *T'u-lao ch'ing-hua*, p. 70.      <sup>38</sup> Chang, *Lü-hua shu*, pp. 292, 316.

<sup>39</sup> Chang, *Nan-jeu*, p. 536.

<sup>40</sup> Chang, *Lü-hua shu*, p. 381.      <sup>41</sup> Chang, *Nan-jeu*, p. 533; *Half of Man*, p. 205.

<sup>42</sup> A Chinese critic has stated that Chang Yung-lin's associating Huang Hsiang-chiu with the legendary goddess Nü-wa, who created heaven, earth, and myriad creatures, caused the marital relationship to fail: his love was sublimated into a kind of worship. See Ta Liu 遼流, "Nü-hsing ch'ung-pai Nan-jeu te i-pan shih nü-jeu te shen-hua chu-t'i" 女性崇拜男人的一半是女人的神話主題 ("Woman Worship: The Mythic Theme in *Half of Man Is Woman*"), in *Chung-kuo hsiên-tai tang-tai wen-hsieh yen-chiu* 中國現代當代文學研究 3 (March 1986), p. 159.

<sup>43</sup> Chang, *T'u-lao ch'ing-hua*, p. 48.

by the standardized look of their black dungarees, the regimented way of life, and hard labor.<sup>44</sup> The hero in *Getting Used to Dying* reminisces about how Mao the "Great Teacher" has forbidden him to love his mother or to love or be loved by another woman at all, because he belongs to the capitalist class, and must be segregated from the other classes and roundly condemned.<sup>45</sup>

The heroine, who pursues both love and sacrifice, appears to have unwittingly made herself vulnerable for another reason. After all, the collective hero of the novellas, though originally honorable and conscious of moral values, has been corrupted by egotism and impractical fantasies due to his long-term confinement. He recognizes his own abnormality, but is too accustomed to it to correct it. As a result of imprisonment in labor camp, he is too cynical about human designs in general to plunge wholeheartedly into love. He cannot help but fear that it might be just another trap. In addition, the cultural gap separating him from the woman in his life brings about unavoidable limits to the immediacy of their relationship, and he tends to feel attracted and repulsed by a given lover at the same time. Somewhat sado-masochistic, he sometimes vents feelings of frustration and anger on his lover, or criticizes her in a manner infused with Confucian patriarchal morality. When the hero recovers his physical strength and self-confidence, and becomes independent, he seeks ways of abandoning his lover in order to pursue his political fantasies unencumbered by family attachments.

Our collective hero is also too absorbed in his self-interested musings and has too many ulterior motives to be capable of real love. Chang Yung-lin's fear of losing Ma Ying-hua probably originates more from his fear of losing a provider and surrogate mother than from his love for her. He marries Huang Hsiang-chiu in great part from his desire for initiation in sex, a home to call his own, and insulation from society and possible future political witch-hunts. Moreover, his marriage satisfies his megalomaniacal patriotism: he needs an independent "kingdom" of several square meters where he can come up with a scheme that would save China from continued misrule.<sup>46</sup> Although Huang has committed a crime, her social status is higher than his. Marriage with her would conceivably be politically advantageous, offering the possibility of changing both his bloodline and political categorization.

Thus the hero of Chang Hsien-liang's novellas is torn between unresolved inner conflicts. His urgent longing for women is accompanied by intense fear and mistrust; he worships women but ends up expressing

repressed violence toward them; he wavers between extreme depression and illusory hope; he regards women as a source of redemption, but denies the possibility of enjoying this redemption himself.

Under these circumstances, Chang Hsien-liang's collective heroine is to be seen as an illusory redeemer. She is subject to capricious fate, and can be more harshly victimized than the hero. The hero, being politically powerless, can hardly offer the heroine any protection. Thus the author refrains from providing the heroine with any hope for resolution of her quandaries. Though resilient enough to survive, she ends up wasting her life. When Shih Tsai again encounters Ch'iao after twelve years, she has become an ugly, gaunt, and highstrung woman who domineers her drunkard of a husband. Ma Ying-hua remains single after Chang Yung-lin's punitive transfer from her locale. Huang Hsiang-chiu, too, apparently faces difficult prospects after her divorce from Chang Yung-lin. Having failed at marriage three times already, will she find many men willing to give her a fourth chance?

Redemption, however, does occur in the intellectual development of the hero. The sympathetic and trusting female, and not the labor camp, regenerates the hero's thought. The labor camp imposes hardships and masculine violence on him under the pretext of remolding; but this fails. By contrast, the heroine unintentionally helps him turn over a new leaf. She provides him with an inspirational model for regeneration and awakens him to his spiritual corruption, motivating him to make autonomous changes.

The narrator-hero of the novellas sometimes seems unaware of the actual causes at work within the stories of personal redemption. On the surface, we learn of a transformation of thought through reading Marx's *Capital*; but contact with the earthy heroines, fine specimens of the "laboring masses," is what really puts the heroes on the path to regeneration. Only when Chang is well fed by Ma Ying-hua does he begin to pick up his long-neglected studies and read Marx's *Capital*. The transformation of his ideology through reading *Capital* during a time when he is materialistically dependent on the illiterate Ma Ying-hua appears even somewhat ridiculous. While as a class enemy Chang cadges food from the laboring masses whom Marx eulogizes, he simultaneously studies Marxist doctrine, which they neither understand nor really care about. Although the narrator-hero insists that the hero transform into a materialist, much of the hero's thought and behavior betrays the philosophical idealism to which he clings. The narrator-hero should therefore be seen as a somewhat comical antihero.

Furthermore, while the hero of the novellas believes that he learns from recurrent ironies in life, the same series of setbacks is also used to deflate

<sup>44</sup> Chang, *Nan-jen*, pp. 407-8.

<sup>45</sup> Chang, *Hsi-huan ssu-wang*, pp. 179-80; *Getting Used to Dying*, p. 166.

<sup>46</sup> Chang, *Nan-jen*, p. 463.

him. In *Mimosa*, Chang Yung-lin once feels elated for having obtained two buns by luck and carefully hides them away, only to find on the following morning that they have been eaten by rats. Later on, he falls into a ditch and loses most of a load of carrots that he had proudly got at a low price by outwitting a peasant.<sup>47</sup> The constant swing between thesis and antithesis, and between climax and anticlimax, figures even more prominently in *Half of Man*: having lusted for Huang's body for so long, Chang finds himself impotent on their wedding night; the villagers treat him to some food and liquor to warm him up in acknowledgment of his heroic deed during the flood, but the cold liquor of poor quality actually makes him colder; and after going through so much scheming and trouble to obtain a permit for divorce, he is reminded by Huang that their application for marriage has never been submitted to the main headquarters for approval in the first place. These embedded ironies may reflect only a narrative preference. But they might also hint at the seemingly unending fluctuations in the history of China's political campaigns. The somewhat pathetic and farcical effect created by the anticlimaxes suggest the atmosphere of absurdity and flux in political culture.

While the author Chang Hsien-liang satirizes the inhumanity and the futility of labor camps and blames the extreme-left regime for the suffering endured by characters in his novellas, he also seems to believe that the hero can be regenerated through contact with the working people. He writes lovingly about the working-class people and expresses faith in them. Basically, then, in doing so he subscribes to a Marxist-Leninist ideology of labor and peasantry, even though in various other writings he criticizes the regime's misuse of the ideology.<sup>48</sup> Saddened by the tragic fate Ch'iao An-p'ing suffers, the narrator in *Passionate Words* remarks, "For an atheist, the people (*jen-min* 人民) are god (*shang-ti* 上帝). Being a weak and shallow-headed atheist who has survived, I want to write down my confession and my prayer to god, that is, to the people, for blessing, hoping that such things will never happen again."<sup>49</sup> But one cannot but wonder who "the people" really are, and if the people really desire to have class struggle and witch-hunts, or whether it is a case of the communist regime's committing one crime after another in the name of the people. As a former prisoner in Communist China has insightfully remarked, "the stand of the people" (*jen-min*

*li-ch'ang* 人民立場), a term constantly adopted by the communist cadres as the gauge of truth when interrogating and terrorizing prisoners, is actually no more than "the stand of the Communist Party."<sup>50</sup> In other words, in the communist usage, instead of doing something for the people, the term "the people" is employed to deceive the people. Viewed from this angle, the narrator's avowed belief in the people as god in the end is unconvincing.

The glorification of labor also appears dubious. Chang Yung-lin's culture and education should have been stripped away by the remolding process. Nevertheless, they continue to distinguish him from the other men, and often function to attract uneducated but upwardly mobile women. However ostensibly the narrator might eulogize physical labor, he actually asserts, and wields, the power of culture. Interestingly enough, the hero sometimes retrieves his yearning for culture as well as his ability to write after having a fulfilling contact with the heroine. Chang Yung-lin starts to write again after he has been "remasculinized" through his heroic act during the flood and his sexual union with Huang. However brief their fulfillment through love may have been, the hero derives from it significant physical and mental transformation.

The narrative voice in the three novellas often has the ring of contrition. The narrator seems to reminisce about mistakes committed inadvertently in his youth because of egotism and foolishness. Having no other way to pay a debt of gratitude to the crucial women in his stories, the narrator must rely on the written word, which satisfies the need to confess and ask forgiveness. By inscribing the story, he is reenacting scenes and repenting his errors. But although the stories portray contrite heroes who are in a sense weaker than the heroines, there is a certain sense of smug self-glorification in the narrator's confessions. To have been loved by these beautiful characters who, in addition, yearn to sacrifice themselves to him is after all the highest praise for the hero. In this sense, Chang Hsien-liang is continuing and reenacting a literary tradition that can be found in Yüan Chen's 元稹 "Story of Ying-ying" ("Ying-ying chuan" 鶯鶯傳), a classical tale of the T'ang dynasty.<sup>51</sup>

The ambivalent attitudes toward women in Chang Hsien-liang's fiction are paralleled at least partially by the author's own remarks. During an interview Chang once claimed: "I find that a woman is more sensible than a

<sup>47</sup> Tuan K'o-wen 段克文, *Chan-fan tzu-shu* 戰犯自述 (*A Memoir of a Prisoner of War*) (1978; rpt. Taipei: Lien-ching Pub. Co., 1979), p. 177.

<sup>48</sup> For the criticism that Marxism has been castrated, see, for instance, Chang Hsien-liang's short stories "Sau-shih-san tz'u k'u'ai-ch'e" 四十三次快車 and "Shuang chung se yü nung" 霜重色愈濃, in *Chang hsien-chi*, vol. 1, pp. 41 and 47, respectively.

<sup>49</sup> Chang, *T'u-lao ch'ing-hua*, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> See "Ying-ying chuan," in Wang Pi-chiang 汪辟疆, comp., *T'ang-jen hsiao-shuo* 唐人小說 (rpt. Taipei: Ho-lo t'u-shu chu-pan-she, 1974), pp. 135-40; "The Story of Ying-ying," trans. James R. Hightower, in *Traditional Chinese Stories: Themes and Variations*, ed. Y. W. Ma and Joseph S. M. Lau (New York: Columbia U.P., 1978), pp. 139-45.



man in many respects. She is at least endowed with humaneness, kindness, and maternal nature. . . . I don't want to understand a woman; I only want to feel her. Even a woman's flaws are lovable. A woman is more materialistic and rather practical-minded, but I can sympathize with her."<sup>52</sup> His respect and admiration for woman aside, the last sentence reveals the kind of smugness that we detect in his male narrators.

We cannot, of course, identify Chang Hsien-liang with Chang Yung-lin and Shih Tsai any more than with any of the heroines, for their creator is larger than all of them put together. The heroine is a product of both fact and fantasy. Chang Hsien-liang once referred to the female characters in his works as "the crystallization of the sacred aura radiated from hundreds of female workers I have observed."<sup>53</sup> These women not only inspire his poetic imagination, but also have a special bearing on a special stage in his life.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, to a certain extent they are all real. But like Flaubert, who once claimed Madame Bovary to be himself, Chang also remarks, "they are just me, or the Lo River Goddess in my dream."<sup>55</sup> In the end his female characters remain idealized male constructs. Symbols of hope and regeneration, they represent the pure and purifying—thus also idealized—rural and working-class China. In *Getting Used to Dying*, the narrator says that the women in his novel are really his fantasies brought on by loneliness, for in reality he lived under sexual repression and was a virgin until the age of thirty-nine. "My solitude was peopled by the company of imagined lovers. By the time I had been given the freedom to write, and even the freedom to publish, I simply dropped their images one by one onto a sheet of paper. As a result, I feel that I begin to understand what literature is. Literature expresses the dreams of mankind, dreams that in themselves are a revolt against reality."<sup>56</sup> In real life in China one would be hard pressed to find as naively romantic a character as Ma Ying-hua, or a woman as popular with ordinary men as Ma was—willing to choose an ex-convict as her fiancé. But

the romanticization itself carries the implication of a rejection of the regime's central myths about the aspirations of the working classes it claims to speak for.

As we have seen, Chang Hsien-liang's heroes attain intellectual transformation through heroines, not through the remolding process dictated by the government. Yet even though female workers serve as sources of redemption for intellectuals, they are also able to call the political system into question and openly laugh about its absurdities with their simple moral values and common sense. With her native intelligence, Huang Hsiang-chiu obviously sees through the Party's false promises. She complains of Chang Yung-lin's risking his own life to rescue the village: "But to struggle to win some kind of 'meritorious service,' that's absurd. Nobody is going to put in a good word for you."<sup>57</sup>

The heroines are certainly persevering, or *kuo-lai* 過來, in Ch'iao An-ping's term.<sup>58</sup> When victimized they rebel against hostile forces. Ma Ying-hua, for instance, dispels fear with her constant cheerful laughter and comic spirit. Armed with a gun, Ch'iao An-p'ing protects Shih Tsai, her prisoner, as if she were his mother, not his guard. Her disregard for politics is such that she even uses public propagandist theatricals like the "Maoist Loyalty Dance" for her own personal purpose; instead of expressing her loyalty to Mao, she uses it to express love for Shih Tsai, a bourgeois class enemy.<sup>59</sup> Even if these heroines are stuck in unfavorable circumstances, they can, as Chang Hsien-liang observes, "transform their tragic lives into comedies."<sup>60</sup> The courageous heroine ensures that life will go on, in spite of encounters with one outrage after another, and thereby provides the hero with the strongest support available to him.

<sup>57</sup> Chang, *Nan-jen*, p. 531; *Half of Man*, p. 201. <sup>58</sup> Chang, *T'u-lao ch'ing-hua*, p. 41.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42. <sup>60</sup> Chang, "Hsin-ling ho jou-t'i te pien-hua," p. 199.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Shih Shu-ch'ing 施叔青, *Wen-t'an fan-ssu yü ch'ien-ch'an Shih Shu-ch'ing yü Ta-lu Iso-chia tui-hua* 文壇反思與前膽施叔青與大陸作家對話 (*Reflections and Outlooks of the Literary World: Shih Shu-ch'ing's Dialogue with P.R.C. Writers*) (Hong Kong: Ming-ch'uang ch'u-pan-she, 1989), p. 69.

<sup>53</sup> Chang Hsien-liang, "Man-chih huang-t'ang yen" 滿紙荒唐言 ("Pages Full of Idle Words"), in *Chang Hsien-chi*, vol. 1, p. 191.

<sup>54</sup> As Chang Hsien-liang later recalls that period in an essay, he was deprived of social rights and a right to love and be loved: all that was left was the animal instinct to survive. Though physically sound, he felt intensely lonely and needed human warmth, in a sense mentally oppressed and distorted. In sum, he was something less than a civilized man. See Chang, "Man-chih huang-t'ang yen," p. 189.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>56</sup> Chang, *Hsi-kuan ssu-wang*, p. 107; *Getting Used to Dying*, p. 91, with slight alteration.