

**Portraying China's
New Women Entrepreneurs**
A Reading of Zhang Xin's Fiction

Daria Berg



PORTRAYING CHINA'S NEW WOMEN
ENTREPRENEURS
A READING OF ZHANG XIN'S FICTION

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*To
the memory of
my mother
Irina Berg, née von Scheffel*

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Portraying China's New Women Entrepreneurs

A Reading of Zhang Xin's Fiction

DARIA BERG

Introduction: Zhang Xin and the Era of Reforms

A new trend emerged in the literary scene of the People's Republic of China during the mid-1980s and 1990s as interest shifted away from writing about the hardships suffered under the regime of Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893-1976) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) but focused instead on the essence of what the era of Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 (1904-97) represented: the rise of entrepreneurialism, the introduction of free enterprise, the possibilities of leaving the state sector, even of giving up engaging in scholarship or other intellectual pursuits and going into business. The economic reforms under the regime of Deng Xiaoping and the re-establishment of private enterprise have brought urban life — a dominant theme in the literature of the 1920s and 1930s — back into the limelight.¹

¹See the pioneering studies by Heinrich Fruehauf, 'Urban Exoticism in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature', in Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang, eds., *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1993, 133-64, and Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University

Women feature prominently as the star protagonists in stories written by a new generation of writers who dramatise the idiosyncrasies of the modern metropolis, conveying the dreams and nightmares of the people who live behind the façades of skyscrapers and neon lights. These contemporary fictional explorations of the world focus on the moods, atmospheres and emotions associated with the new business world and the economic climate of free enterprise. They demonstrate how the Chinese city at the end of the twentieth century once again feels its pulse beat in tune with the fluctuations of the free market economy.²

Critical analysis of the literary discourse and its cultural context provides important and fascinating insights into perceptions of life, the urban dwellers' fears, hopes and desires and the transformation of society in China during the 1990s. The study of how these texts depict life in the modern-day cities sheds new light on changes in the perceptions of gender and power as China advances into the twenty-first century.

The rise of the female entrepreneur appears as the main focus of the fictional narratives by the woman writer Zhang Xin 張欣 (1954-) during the 1990s. Zhang Xin, who was born in Beijing and now lives in Guangzhou 廣州 (Canton), ranks among the most prolific authors of the 'new urban fiction' (*xin shimin xiaoshuo* 新市民小說) that reflects on the economic boom, the spirit of entrepreneurialism

Press, 2000; on the new urban literati, see also Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996; Xie Youshun 謝有順, 'Shechi de huayu' 奢侈的話語, *Nanfang wentan* 南方文壇 72, 1999, 10-12; Geremie R. Barmé, *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

²On the modern business world, see Solomon M. Karmel, 'Emerging Securities Markets in China: Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics', *China Quarterly*, 140, 1994, 1105-20; Leslie Sklair, *Sociology of the Global System*, London: Prentice Hall, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, 2nd edn, 1995 (esp. ch. 7: "China and the Global System", 216-45); Charlotte Ikels, *The Return of the God of Wealth: The Transition to a Market Economy in Urban China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996; Margaret H. Pearson, *China's New Business Elite: The Political Consequences of Economic Reform*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997; Jocelyn E. Gamble, 'Stir-Fried Stocks: Share Dealers, Trading Places, and New Options in Contemporary Shanghai', *Modern China* 23.2, 1997, 181-215.

and the new urban lifestyles.³ To distinguish these texts from the 'new urban' literature of the early twentieth century and other urban narratives of the post-Mao era,⁴ I shall refer to them as 'neon light fiction'.⁵

Zhang Xin has been publishing since 1978 and her stories have been successful: they have been printed in magazines such as *Shanghai wenxue* 上海文學 (Shanghai Literature), *Guangzhou wenyi* 廣州文藝 (Canton Literature and Arts), *Shouhuo* 收穫 (Harvest), and *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 (Fiction Monthly). They have been reprinted in anthologies⁶ and she has released her collected writings in four volumes.⁷ Her stories have also won literary awards.⁸

³On Zhang Xin 張欣, see Cheng Wenchao 程文超, 'Yuhaili de shiqing shouwang — Wo du Zhang Xin de dushi gushi' 欲海里的詩情守望——我讀張欣的都市故事, *Wenxue pinglun* 文學評論 3, 1996, 71-5; *idem*, 'Ci an de shiqing shouwang — Lingnan wenxue jianying 此岸的詩情守望 — 嶺南文學剪影', in Huang Xiuji 黃修己, ed., *Bainian Zhonghua wenxue shihua* (1898-1997) 百年中華文學史話, Hong Kong: Xin Yazhou, 1997, 188-92.

⁴See, for example, Lee, *Shanghai Modern*.

⁵These stories first appeared in literary magazines (such as *Guangzhou wenyi* 廣州文藝) featuring sections on 'urban literature' (*dushi wenxue* 都市文學) and 'urban neon lights' (*dushi nihong* 都市霓虹).

⁶The most recent ones are: Zhang Xin, *Chengshi qingren* 城市情人, ed. Wang Shuo, Beijing: Huayi, 1995 (hereafter: CSQR); *idem*, *Suiyue wudi* 歲月無敵, Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi, 1996 (hereafter: SYWD).

⁷Zhang Xin, *Jingtu molu* 驚途末路, Beijing: Qunzhong, 1996 (hereafter: JTML); *idem*, *Shishi sumiao* 世事素描, Beijing: Qunzhong, 1996 (hereafter: SSSM); *idem*, *Ranshao suiyue* 燃燒歲月, Beijing: Qunzhong, 1996 (hereafter: RSSY); *idem*, *Shangzhan qingzhan* 商戰情戰, Beijing: Qunzhong, 1996 (hereafter: SZQZ).

⁸Zhang Xin received the following literary awards: the Sixth (1992-1993) *Shanghai wenxue* Literary Award for medium-length fiction for the story 'Shouxi' 首席 (first published in *Shanghai wenxue* 11, 1993, 4-32; hereafter: SX); the Third and Fifth *Shiyue wenxue* 十月文學 Awards respectively for 'Touru jiaose' 投入角色 (in RSSY, 293-361) and 'Yongyuan de paihui' 永遠的徘徊 (in JTML, 59-115); a prize in the First Shanghai Awards for Excellent Novels and Medium-length Stories for 'Jue fei ouran' 絕非偶然 (in CSQR, 1-71; hereafter: JFOR); the Third *Lu Xun* 魯迅 Literary Award for 'Buyao wen wo cong nali lai' 不要問我從哪里來 (in SSSM,

Some have been turned into television dramas⁹ and some have been translated into English.¹⁰ Zhang Xin does not like theorising about her works. 'Fiction must be a good read', she said during an interview in the summer of 1997 at the International Grand Hotel in Guangzhou, one of the sites that epitomise the glamour and modernity in her fiction.¹¹

In 1969 Zhang Xin, aged barely fifteen, entered the army, serving for the first eight years as an orderly in an army hospital and for a further eight years as a writer in an army theatrical troupe, until her demobilisation in 1984. The daughter of cadres, she has always belonged to the establishment. In 1990 she graduated from Beijing University where she trained in creative writing. She is a member of the Guangzhou Municipal Literary Research Institute and the Chinese Writers Association. She explains how she became interested in writing about the business world: 'My husband is a businessman and I have a few good friends in the business world. They never fail to fascinate me when they talk about the things around them.'¹² The business world of the 1990s sets the stage for her protagonists' adventures.

Taking the Plunge

Zhang Xin's story 'Ni meiyou liyou bufeng' 你没有理由不疯 (No Reason Why You Should Not Go Crazy), first published in June 1997, dramatises how one woman intellectual takes the plunge into the ocean of the free market economy and

112-63); and the 1995 Zhuang Zhongwen 庄重文 Literary Award for her literary achievements (see Author's Introduction in SYWD, i; Author's biography in SZQZ, i).

⁹For example, the medium-length stories 'Ban ni dao liming' 伴你到黎明 (in SZQZ, 346-409) and 'Suiyue wudi' 歲月無敵 (in JTML, 434-85).

¹⁰For example, for translations of 'Shouxi' and 'Jue fei ouran', see Zhang Xin, 'Where Angels Dare to Tread', trans. Josephine A. Matthews, *Chinese Literature* 3, 1995, 10-85, and *idem*, 'Certainly Not by Coincidence', trans. Daniel B. Wright, *Chinese Literature* 3, 1993, 3-76.

¹¹Interview with the author, 12 September 1997, Guangzhou.

¹²Zhang Xin, 'Wo shi shei 我是誰/Portrait of Myself', trans. Li Ziliang, *Chinese Literature* 3, 1993, 77-9, 78.

becomes an entrepreneur in private industry.¹³ When Deng Xiaoping made his southern excursion (*nanxun* 南巡), or 'imperial tour' south via Shanghai to Guangdong in early 1992, the economic revolution heralding free markets and private businesses finally spread from the countryside to the cities. The new slang for the path to paradise, the gateway to wealth, was *xiahai* 下海. The notion of *xiahai*, 'going to sea', has come to denote 'taking the plunge' and going into business, striking out on one's own in the world of private enterprise.¹⁴ It has become the key concept for those who dream of success, money and power in the 1990s.

The main female protagonist of 'No Reason Why You Should Not Go Crazy' is Gu Lan 谷蘭, a university graduate and pharmacologist who works in the dispensary of a state-run hospital in Guangzhou. She is a typical heroine in the world of Zhang Xin's fiction: a young intellectual from a cadre family with an impeccable Communist background. Her father is a war veteran and ranks high in the Communist hierarchy. She is married to another university graduate from a similar family background who also works in a state-owned company. They lead a middle-class lifestyle of neither luxury nor poverty.

When Gu Lan meets a former classmate at a reunion she exclaims on seeing her friend's modern outfit: 'I see your husband has made it!' Her friend retorts: 'It isn't my husband who's made it. I've earned it myself.'¹⁵ Her statement marks this woman as a heroine of the modern age and a new archetype of neon light fiction: a woman who has gone into business. We shall first look at the theme of women in business and then discuss how the text perceives intellectuals in relation to the modern business world.

¹³Zhang Xin, 'Ni meiyou liyou bufeng' 你没有理由不疯, *Shanghai wenxue* 6, 1997, 4-25 (hereafter: *MLBF*).

¹⁴The term originally related to entry into the demi-monde of Shanghai at the beginning of the twentieth century.

¹⁵*MLBF*, 8a.

The New Heroines: Women in Business

Like her former classmate, Gu Lan, too, sets out to embrace the modern age, its spirit of entrepreneurialism and the culture-ideology of consumerism.¹⁶ Without leaving the security of her job in the state sector, she teams up with her friend to deal in various goods that she can sell over the counter in her pharmacy alongside the medicines.¹⁷ What is more, she decides to start speculating on the stock market.¹⁸

Women in business appear as the main theme in many works of neon light fiction by both male and female writers. The story 'Nanzihan, ah, Nanzihan' 男子漢阿男子漢 (A Real Man) by the writer Huang Jinhong 黃錦鴻 from Guangzhou, and published in 1986, is among the earliest works of neon light fiction.¹⁹ It introduced the character of the strong, self-confident and successful businesswoman as a major protagonist in fiction and introduced her role into the contemporary urban consciousness. The hero of the story feels attracted by the chairwoman of a successful private business enterprise but their marriage soon develops into a competitive show of domineering instincts.

The short story 'Tiantang niao' 天堂鳥 (Bird of Paradise) by Li Zhibang 李治邦, a writer from Tianjin, first published in 1994, portrays a female philosophy graduate who leaves both her husband and her job in a state-run advertising company to go into business in Zhuhai 珠海, one of the first four Special Economic Zones in Guangdong province, where she makes a fortune.²⁰

¹⁶Scholars have taken social envy and conspicuous consumption as indications of a consumer revolution and an emerging culture-ideology of consumerism in the metropolitan areas of the coastal regions of China, see Sklair, *Sociology of the Global System*, 242.

¹⁷MLBF, 8a-b.

¹⁸MLBF, 11a.

¹⁹Huang Jinhong 黃錦鴻, 'Nanzihan, ah, Nanzihan' 男子漢阿男子漢, *Guangzhou wenyi* 9, 1986, 2-17.

²⁰Li Zhibang 李治邦, 'Tiantang niao' 天堂鳥, *Shanghai wenxue* 9, 1994, 21-39.

The narrative voice in the text depicts her ex-husband, the hero of the story, as being totally at her mercy.

In Zhang Xin's stories, it is primarily the women who take the lead and plunge into private enterprise while their husbands stay in ailing state-run units and struggle to compete. Her early 1990s story 'Jue fei ou'ran' 絕非偶然 (Certainly Not by Coincidence) depicts a couple working in two different advertising agencies, the husband in a state-run company, the wife in a private one.²¹ In their pursuit of wealth and recognition they begin to compete against each other and end up as rivals trying to outdo one another as their marriage collapses.

In 'Shouxi' 首席 (The Chief), a story Zhang Xin published in 1993, two women, former classmates and the best of friends, have turned into rivals in their roles as the heads of private enterprises in the toy manufacturing industry. Both are very successful in business and exporting. Their lives are dictated by the rhythms of their businesses. As the narrative voice remarks: 'Day after day, it was clients, hard currency and fluctuations on the gold market.'²²

The story 'Ai you ruhe' 愛又如何 (What's Love) by Zhang Xin, which appeared in 1994, describes how the heroine, a literature graduate, loses her job in a state-owned publishing house and joins a private publishing business editing women's magazines.²³ She also turns to moonlighting by writing fiction at night. The heroine makes her way up working as a columnist and freelance literary agent and eventually earns both money and fame.

Another major female character in the same story personifies the new business heroine in urban consumer culture, a 'powerful woman' (*nü qiangren* 女強人). Starting as a salesgirl, she works herself up and becomes the manager of a department store and a star in the business world. She epitomises urban glamour, clinching deals over her mobile phone, driving a foreign car, dining in expensive restaurants and living in a luxury flat. Her portrayal also adds a new touch to the image of the successful woman in the modern city: she refuses to marry but

²¹JFOR, 1-71.

²²SX, 17b.

²³Zhang Xin, 'Ai you ruhe' 愛又如何, *Shanghai wenxue* 10, 1994, 4-32.

chooses lovers as she pleases. Mobile phones and cars appear as the urban woman's accessories that signify 'instant and obvious social status' as a Chinese journalist put it.²⁴ These luxury items also characterise her as glamorous and modern.

The story 'Feichang xiatian' 非常夏天 (A Very Hot Summer) by Zhang Xin, published in September 1997 in a Guangzhou daily newspaper, portrays the female managing director of a company dealing in cars as epitomising the glamour of China's new business elite.²⁵ She also becomes the object of envious dreams by the lower-level office ladies who risk everything to emulate her.

These stories show how both male and female voices perceive the image of the business woman in modern-day China. The theme of women in business both in literary texts and the contemporary cultural discourse has begun to capture the public imagination. A list of China's eleven richest business leaders included two women. One of them was expelled from Beijing University in 1985 when she was discovered to have turned down a place offered earlier at a less prestigious institution. She went on to found Dyne, a computer company which has grown into a consortium worth 2.5 billion yuan and is involved in everything from trade to property.²⁶

A male literary critic from Guangzhou, Guo Xiaodong 郭小東, celebrates the image of woman as the very essence of the city: 'Women are the main protagonists of modern urban literature. Urban colour is becoming feminised, advertising billboards, neon lights — tender seduction everywhere.'²⁷ In his eyes, woman has come to epitomise the spirit of the modern metropolitan world. His statement

²⁴Cf. Orville Schell, *Mandate of Heaven: A New Generation of Entrepreneurs, Dissidents, Bohemians and Technocrats Lay Claim to China's Future*, London: Little, Brown and Co., 1995, 397.

²⁵Zhang Xin, 'Feichang xiatian' 非常夏天, *Yangcheng wanbao* 羊城晚報, 19 September 1997, B6 (hereafter: *FCXT*).

²⁶Graham Hutchings, 'Chinese glory in their billionaire comrades', *Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 1997, 18.

²⁷Guo Xiaodong 郭小東, 'Dushi de fengya' 都市的風雅, *Guangzhou wenyi* 4, 1990, 45; cf. Fruehauf, 1993, 161.

anticipates the focus on women as the heroines of neon light fiction. Although Zhang Xin's stories also depict men going into business, the women protagonists generally emerge as the leaders and the winners in the modern business world. Her urban dramas enact and therefore perpetuate the image of the female entrepreneur as a new major protagonist in the cultural discourse.

Entrepreneurialism and the Fashion Craze

What is the motive behind this phenomenon? Why do women go into business and how do these texts perceive the answer to this question? The narrative voice in our story emphasises repeatedly that money is not the ultimate motive, pointing out that Gu Lan has no financial pressures to go into business. Even her husband cannot understand her decision to start a business: 'If it were for money, I could understand it. But since you don't do it for money, I really don't understand why you're actually doing it?' Gu Lan replies: 'I don't know either, perhaps it is some kind of feeling of having really lived.'²⁸

Gu Lan first gets interested in the new business culture when she realises that she is out of touch with the modern age and that the values of the old familiar world of cadres and the old system have become irrelevant or meaningless. She notices that everyone around her is already involved in free enterprise and investing in the stock market. When she joins a class reunion she discovers it is a 'very modern gathering' as her classmates exchange the latest business information and advice on the stock exchange.²⁹ She begins to perceive her life as dull and monotonous. The narrative voice explains:

She really did not covet money. ... But she was driven by a feeling of rejoining the group, as nowadays everyone lived like that, and you simply had to display these skills, otherwise you might lag behind, which would give you that unbearable feeling of having missed out on life.³⁰

²⁸*MLBF*, 11a.

²⁹*MLBF*, 8a.

³⁰*MLBF*, 9a.

In sum Gu Lan craves modernity, to become part of the group she used to belong to, one which has become the new business elite. She dreams of taking part in the new urban lifestyles and the modern age. Her motives are the desire for self-determination and the glamour she perceives as the core of modernity.

The text defines the fashion craze, the obsession with labels and brand names, as one aspect of modernity. Gu Lan's friend and classmate, who has become a successful business woman and wears the latest designer creations, points out to her that her dress is outdated.³¹ The craze for fashion here appears as part of the search for glamour and the modern lifestyles, a symbol for being in touch with modernity.

Contemporary observers have described clothing as having become a political barometer since 1978 when the party relaxed prohibitions on bourgeois fashions such as dresses, short skirts and Western suits.³² The first Western designer shops, such as the American DKNY (Donna Karan) boutique, opened in Shenzhen 深圳 in 1986.³³ Armani jackets and gold Rolex watches became the craze of the early 1990s while styles began to change rapidly.³⁴ In 1993 the Italian designers Gianfranco Ferre and Valentino held a rock music/fashion extravaganza at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing and fuelled the dreams of glamour among the urban dwellers.³⁵ Zhang Xin's business women wear Karl Lagerfeld and Valentino and the most successful of them are, as the narrative voice observes, 'obsessed with fashion'.³⁶ The protagonists make money in business which enables them to afford to dress up and display their membership of the modern elite.

Chen Danyan 陳丹燕 (1958-), a woman writer living in Shanghai, describes in her city reportage 'Shidai kafeiguan' 時代咖啡館 (The Times Café) how

³¹MLBF, 8a.

³²Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 19.

³³Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 334.

³⁴Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 384.

³⁵Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 398.

³⁶SX, 4a; JFOR, 1.

entrepreneurs cater to the craze for Western designer goods and perfumes by selling counterfeit versions.³⁷ In the early 1990s Shanghai entrepreneurs produced fake high-fashion garments such as Giorgio Giovanni and sold a brand of make-up called Bourjois, a trade name that puns on one of the most anti-Communist words of all. These were for all those who aspired to take part in the modern lifestyles but could not yet afford to do so.³⁸ The glamour of modernity appears to go against the very grain of the old familiar world.

The craze for modern outfits and grooming also appears at the very centre of urban life in a story published in 1995 by Tang Ying 唐穎, another young woman writer from Shanghai.³⁹ The title 'Hong Yan' 紅顏 (The Colour Red) puns on *hong yan* 紅眼 'red eyes', or the modern disease of social envy that has come hand in hand with conspicuous consumption. The action mainly takes place in one of Shanghai's most modern and fashionable beauty parlours on Huaihai 淮海 Road, which the narrative voice calls 'the stage of the world', in a similar way to Chen Danyan's calling the Times Café 'the living-room of the city'.⁴⁰ These narratives perceive characters appearing in such places both as members of the new urban elite and as epitomising modernity.

Coffee shops, revolving restaurants in five-star hotels, clubs and beauty parlours, places perceived to be the most modern and glamorous sites of the city, feature as the main places of action in the narratives of Zhang Xin and the other neon light fiction writers. A typical example, the story 'Shoushang de xingguang' 手上的星光 (Starlight in my Hand) by Qiu Huadong 邱華棟 (1969-), which appeared in 1995, reads like a catalogue of Beijing's five-star hotels and clubs.⁴¹ The decision to go into business means being able to afford going to such places

³⁷Chen Danyan 陳丹燕, 'Shanghairen de "mianzi" yu "jiali"' 上海人的 "面子" 與 "夾里", *Shanghai wenxue* 3, 1997, 4-16 (hereafter: SHRM), 7b-c.

³⁸Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 385.

³⁹Tang Ying 唐穎, 'Hong Yan' 紅顏, *Shanghai wenxue* 9, 1995, 4-31 (hereafter: HY).

⁴⁰HY, 4; see also SHRM, 7b-c.

⁴¹Qiu Huadong 邱華棟, 'Shoushang de xingguang' 手上的星光, *Shanghai wenxue* 1, 1995, 10-38 (hereafter: SSXG), 10-11.

and joining in the fashion craze while searching for modernity and attempting to establish one's identity in the new urban world.

Intellectuals who Give up Scholarship and Go into Business

Another important aspect of Gu Lan's story is the issue of intellectuals going into business. The first characters to embrace the modern age of entrepreneurship are Gu Lan's tenant who has not even finished middle school, her maid and even the steamed-dumpling seller at the corner. She discovers that they all speculate on the stock exchange and succeed in making money long before she has even considered getting involved.

The government sanctioned China's first private businesses in the form of individual (*geti* 個體) enterprises in 1979, followed by a second-type of non-state business, the private (*siying* 私營) enterprises, in 1988.⁴² In 1993 the official number of individual businesses was fifteen million, while the number of private enterprises had grown to at least half a million by 1994. Scholars have estimated actual numbers as even higher. Both the first individual entrepreneurs and the first private enterprise owners were of lower-status backgrounds, including ex-convicts, the unemployed, or semi-skilled workers. Another example appears in Zhang Xin's story 'What's Love?'. The heroine's maid and childminder, a semi-literate woman from the countryside, makes a fortune as a book trader in the independent publishing industry, which since the 1980s has begun to challenge the state's control over the printed word. While such millionaires became legendary in the late 1980s,⁴³ Zhang Xin's narrative typically portrays a female protagonist in this role.

When China's first national computerised stock exchange — the first since 1949 — opened in Shanghai in December 1990, and another in Shenzhen six

⁴²Pearson, *China's New Business Elite*, 16ff.

⁴³For one entrepreneur from Shandong who set up the first independent publishing house in China, see Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 300.

months later, people from lower social backgrounds, of lower educational levels or without secure jobs were also among the first to invest in the stock market. Some of these first punters amassed incredible fortunes.

Gu Lan's story shows the conflicts and tensions arising when intellectuals begin to follow suit and jump into the sea of free enterprise. Gu Lan's husband explicitly states that it is not honourable for intellectuals to speculate in shares.⁴⁴ He is ashamed to join in the stock craze and is unhappy about mixing with people of lower social status and lower education. His voice expresses contempt and distrust of entrepreneurs, an attitude founded on decades of indoctrination against capitalists and the bourgeoisie. This also recalls the traditional Confucian prejudice against the merchant class.

The dilemma of intellectuals who give up scholarship and go into business is not new to China. The Confucian scholars of the Ming 明 (1368-1644) and Qing 清 (1644-1911) dynasties had already fretted over the decision of whether or not it was all right to do so.⁴⁵ During the first years of Deng Xiaoping's reforms only those individuals with no alternative means of making a living were likely to embark on a career in the private sector. Initially the state itself restricted business licences to youths awaiting employment, unemployed employables, and some selected retired persons with urban registration.⁴⁶ While the uneducated tenant, the maid and the steamed-dumpling seller turn out to be successful on the stock exchange, however, Gu Lan's husband ends up investing the family's entire savings in the so-called 'rubbish shares' and loses everything.⁴⁷

The text here reflects popular perceptions that neither education nor talent seem related to financial success in an unpredictable world that appears to invert all

⁴⁴MLBF, 11a.

⁴⁵On Ming/Qing Confucian scholars who gave up scholarship and went into business, see Yu Yingshi 余英時, *Zhongguo jinshi zongjiao lunli yu shangren jingshen* 中國近世宗教倫理與商人精神, Taipei: Lianjing, 1987, esp. 104-21.

⁴⁶Ikels, *The Return of the God of Wealth*, 181.

⁴⁷MLBF, 16a.

the familiar social values.⁴⁸ The intellectuals who go into business have to redefine their position in the modern world where wealth has become the new and only standard of success.

Many intellectuals did give up a career in government or in academia to take the plunge and go into business. In the early 1990s, for example, a famous professor left Beijing's College of Finance to set up a private school teaching the mysteries of the stock market to potential investors. At Shanghai's Finance University sixty-four professors quit in a single month to play the stock market instead.⁴⁹

Zhang Xin's stories provide many more examples: Gu Lan discovers at a reunion of her former classmates from university that all of them have already gone into business. In the story 'Certainly Not by Coincidence', a professor of philosophy joins a private advertising agency. This theme is also taken up in another story by Sun Yong 孫頤 (1950-), a writer from Shanghai, entitled 'Jinri hangqing' 今日行情 (Today's Share Price). The main protagonist, a mathematician and cadre, becomes a stock broker and, like Gu Lan's husband, he loses both his and his relative's entire fortunes.⁵⁰

A recent study of China's new business elite has shown that in the mid-1990s most of its members had high levels of education and a significant number among them were established academics and technical experts.⁵¹ A prominent example of intellectuals who went into free enterprise in the 1990s is the writer Zhang Xianliang 張賢亮 (born in Nanjing 南京 in 1936) who is best known for his controversial novels depicting and exposing life in China's Gulag, the corrective labour camps of the 1950s, 60s and 70s.⁵²

⁴⁸Karmel, 'Emerging Security Markets', 1118; Gamble, 'Stir-Fried Stocks', 195.

⁴⁹Schell, *Mandate of Heaven*, 372.

⁵⁰Sun Yong 孫頤, 'Jinri hangqing' 今日行情, *Shanghai wenxue* 12, 1994, 38-43.

⁵¹Pearson, *China's New Business Elite*, 18f.

⁵²On Zhang Xianliang, see Kwok-kan Tam, 'Sexuality and Power in Zhang Xianliang's Novel *Half of Man is Women*', *Modern Chinese Literature* 5.1, 1989, 55-72; Douwe Fokkema, 'Modern Chinese Literature as a Result of Acculturation: The Intriguing Case of Zhang Xianliang', in Lloyd Haft, ed., *Words from the West: Western Texts in Chinese Literary Context*:

True to the spirit of the age Zhang Xianliang, too, decided to go into business. He deplored the fact that his literary fame and distinction both in China and abroad had failed to yield any financial reward. He resented the fact that he could not even afford to buy a small car. In 1993 he had become the chairman of three big companies dealing with trade development, business information, and interior design in the north-west region of Ningxia 寧夏 and had set up a commercial film studio. In business, he said, he dealt with anything he could legally deal with. He admitted he already felt addicted to doing business. From now onwards, he added, he would no longer write about Mao Zedong's labour camps but instead about the business culture of the 1990s.⁵³

Like these intellectuals of the 1990s and also like her former classmates who had all gone into business, the protagonist Gu Lan decides to 'become modern' and begins to trade in down bedding, drugs to treat infertility in men and hair conditioner. The down bedding sells out rapidly and her female former classmate, who is now her business partner, suggests opening a wholesale clothing business. Gu Lan does not give up her job in the state-run dispensary but uses her workplace to earn money for herself. She operates here in the grey zone of legal activity which is tolerated within her work unit as everyone else conducts similar business.⁵⁴

The text here charts the speed of social transformation in the 1990s. We see how values could differ even within one social group such as university graduates. Some, like Gu Lan's friends and classmates, had already embraced the new era and some, like Gu Lan herself, tried to catch up, while others such as her husband still showed reluctance.

Essays to Honor Erik Zürcher on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday, Leiden: Centre of Non-Western Studies, 1993, 26-34; Rint Sysbesma, 'Literature, Business and the "Cultural Revolution": an Update on Zhang Xianliang', *China Information* 8.4, 1994, 52.

⁵³See Lan Hei 藍黑 and A Jin 阿今, 'De Long wang Shu de Zhongguo wenrenmen' 得隴望蜀的中國文人們, *Zhongguo qingnian* 中國青年 5, 1993, 42-3.

⁵⁴On grey money, see Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power*, London: Nicholas Brealey, 1994, 343.

Perceived Corruption in the Press and Publishing

Gu Lan has no qualms about going into business but the closer she comes to realising her goal of living the modern life, the more she sees the new world as being ravaged by corruption. She first expresses doubts as to the efficacy of the male infertility drug that her classmate asks her to sell. Gu Lan insists that it is not morally right to sell a cheap drug with high profits for its dealers and cheat customers, but her classmate and business partner dismisses her doubts. Gu Lan, however, fears for the position of intellectuals — now the new business elite — who no longer exert moral leadership in society.⁵⁵ She also discovers that corruption is rampant among her former classmates, friends and colleagues.⁵⁶

Gu Lan, moreover, learns from a friend who gets hold of leaked documents that a big pharmaceutical company is trying to cover up a medical scandal because it is about to float its shares on the stock market. It emerges that the company had sold a drug for children's growth which has turned out to carry the risk of CJD infection. When Gulan finds out about this, she is the only one willing to risk everything — including her husband's position — in order to make the news public. Her husband asks her not to interfere but she feels she owes it to all children. In her quest for justice she first turns to a friend who works for the Public Security Bureau (PSB). But even the PSB does not want to know anything about it since they are too busy with all sorts of other cases. Her friend from the PSB even asks her why she should care to get involved since her daughter is not affected. Gu Lan eventually manages to publicise the scandal in a minor newspaper but the public reaction is disappointing and the company floats its shares on the stock exchange all the same.⁵⁷

These events, and the futility of her protest, point to the wider trend of accommodating corruption at all levels of society. Gu Lan realises that she ultimately

⁵⁵MLBF, 10b.

⁵⁶MLBF, 17b, 20a.

⁵⁷MLBF, 17a-25a.

cannot reconcile the glamour of the modern business world she has craved, with her conscience, her intuitive knowledge of what is morally right (*liangzhi* 良知, *liangxin* 良心).⁵⁸ Here the text defines her moral outlook in traditional Confucian terms.⁵⁹

Current news reports from China suggest that corruption is perceived to have proliferated.⁶⁰ In 1996 the Chinese government decided to get tough on crime and launched an anti-corruption campaign. Newspapers in China have grown bolder in exposing corruption, such as *Nanfang Zhoumo* 南方周末 (Southern Weekend) from Guangzhou, which in 1997 included sensational stories of corruption cases and consequently enjoyed record sales.⁶¹ The irony of this discourse on corruption lies in its duplicity: ostensibly marching along with the government's moral crusade, it ultimately serves a commercial purpose.

Book vendors in Beijing stock issues of an underground bestseller entitled *Tiannu* 天怒 (Wrath of God), a potboiler about a man who keeps lovers in several countries, embezzles freely from construction projects and mocks upright officials as fools. These are barely concealed references to the case of the former party chief of Beijing, Chen Xitong 陳希同, who was sacked in 1995 for having been

⁵⁸MLBF, 23b.

⁵⁹On *liangxin* in the book of Mencius (Mengzi 孟子, 372-289 BC), see *Mengzi yinde* 孟子引得, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series 17, ed. William Hung *et al.*, Beijing: Hafu-Yanjing xueshe, 1941, 6A.8. On the concept of *liangzhi* (see *Mengzi*, 7A.15) in Neo-Confucian thought, see Wolfgang Bauer, *China und die Hoffnung auf Glück: Paradiese, Utopien, Idealvorstellungen in der Geistesgeschichte Chinas*, repr. München: Carl Hanser, 1974, 334-6.

⁶⁰In the contemporary Chinese discourse — similar to Zhang Xin's story — corruption often appears linked to the image of illness such as AIDS, cf. Zhu Hong, 'Women, Illness, and Hospitalization: Images of Women in Contemporary Chinese Fiction', in Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, Tyrene White, eds., *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1994, 318-38, 331.

⁶¹*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 160:33, 14 August 1997, 55.

involved in such activities.⁶²

In October 1997 a high-level meeting was held to tackle corruption in business. The director of the State Council's Office for Checking Unhealthy Tendencies in Business Activities urged the need for effective checks, paying special attention to scandals involving pharmaceutical products, among others.⁶³ But politicians and cadres are not the only ones to get involved in corrupt activities. One private entrepreneur in Guangzhou, who first made a fortune as a restaurant owner, then went into property deals, decided to break into selling medicines. He made friends with the factory manager of a large pharmaceutical manufacturer who agreed to supply him with the latest kind of intravenous solutions. The law does not allow individuals to trade in medicines but the entrepreneur spent his money and time taking the factory manager on a tour of the city's most expensive restaurants.⁶⁴

In 1993 an outraged Chinese citizen — rather like the protagonist Gu Lan — passed on to American journalists confidential documents and other information about a medical scandal: an entrepreneur had washed more than one million used disposable hypodermic needles and resold them as new ones to the Beijing Red Cross Blood Centre. He had carried on this business for around five years while doctors discovered a rapid increase in inexplicable infections. The scandal was never publicised in the Chinese press.⁶⁵

⁶²*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 160:40, 2 October 1997, 21-22.

⁶³*BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, Third Series*, FE/3046, 10 October 1997, G/5-6.

⁶⁴Kristof and WuDunn, *China Wakes*, 349-52.

⁶⁵Kristof and WuDunn, *China Wakes*, 356ff.

White Collar Crime

One senior cadre in Guangzhou who had been an advocate of reform in 1987 summarised the atmosphere in 1993:

The level of morality has dropped drastically. ... Nothing is guiding people — not Marxism, not Confucianism, not religion. At least religion put the fear of hell into one ... but now people don't believe in these things.⁶⁶

Gu Lan's story is not alone in focusing on corruption and white collar crime in free enterprise. Zhang Xin's story 'A Very Hot Summer' shows how a low-level office lady embarks on a quest for glamour and starts dealing in luxury cars by illegal means using her clients' money as capital.⁶⁷ She does not even shirk from committing an economic crime that would earn her the death penalty if detected.⁶⁸ But Zhang Xin does not have her protagonist executed. Instead the office lady becomes the victim of highway muggers. An encounter with people leading ordinary lifestyles makes the upstart millionairess repent and sends her on the path of moral reform.

Qiu Huadong, a young male writer who lives in Beijing, depicts in 'Starlight in my Hand' how young intellectuals come to the city looking for fame and fortune, embark on free enterprise, get a taste of the high life and pursue all kinds of illegal activities. In these narratives corruption appears as yet another aspect of modernity.⁶⁹ In Zhang Xin's stories white-collar crime, however, serves the purpose of providing moral insight, putting the heroines right back on the track of conventional morality defined in Confucian terms.

⁶⁶Ikels, *The Return of the God of Wealth*, 269.

⁶⁷FCXT, B6.

⁶⁸On economic crime, see Deng Xiaoping, *Fundamental Issues in Present-Day China*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1987, 137-38; cf. Ikels, *The Return of the God of Wealth*, 39.

⁶⁹SSXG, 10-38.

Concluding Remarks: Modern Woman and the Search for Identity

Gu Lan's quest for modernity, her desire to escape from a dull and outdated lifestyle and her craving for glamour lead her into the circle of China's new business elite. She joins the group of intellectuals who have already gone into business and becomes part of the set. She meets up with her peers at clubs, expensive restaurants and parties in five-star hotels. But when she has become a part of what she perceives as the modern and the glamorous life she also comes face to face with the other side of the high life: corruption, selfishness and a lack of concern for the welfare of others.

The narrative voice ultimately undermines the success of Gu Lan's quest to catch up with modernity. The end of the story leaves her a single parent with her marriage in ruins, and even a brief love affair has no future. Human relationships are traded and exchanged like commodities. Even human life is valued at nothing when it comes to making money. The narrative voice equates these phenomena with madness, as the title of the story has predicted: 'No Reason Why You Should Not Go Crazy'.

The text refracts the concept of madness through several levels of meaning. The cover-up of the CJD scandal in the pharmaceutical industry appears to be crazy and against all moral values. The lack of public concern after its publication appears as madness: nobody seems to show concern for the welfare of the people but everyone is interested in personal profit. Such attitudes in society will literally result in madness: as the children get infected with the CJD virus, they face future insanity.

Metaphorically the quest for modernity can only result in madness. The protagonist tries to raise her voice in protest, but in vain because everybody has already turned mad. Her outcry reminds us of the desperate diary notes decrying a cannibalistic Confucian culture in the early twentieth-century short story 'Kuangren

riji' 狂人日記 (Diary of a Madman) by Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936).⁷⁰ While satire in the 'Diary of a Madman' targets Confucianism, however, Zhang Xin's text depicts the very lack of conventional — that is, Confucian — morality as the cause of madness, implicitly arguing for a return to traditional ethics.

The narrative voice reveals itself as that of a moralist. At the same time it also voices the fears and concerns of the urban dwellers after the initial euphoria that welcomed the economic boom of the early 1990s. In reading these stories we catch glimpses of the modern Chinese city dwellers and for a moment we become able to share their fears, dreams and hopes. All the stories depict modernity as a world of inverted values and expectations, turning the familiar old world topsy-turvy. The heroines of these stories are the products of the economic reforms introduced in the Deng Xiaoping/Jiang Zemin 江泽民 era.

The women characters depicted in Zhang Xin's fiction appear as the agents of the new consumer culture and as its most eager participants. They take on new roles as entrepreneurs, and material success does not elude them. The narratives play out the dreams of female empowerment in economic terms. The women protagonists epitomise the quest for glamour and modernity but they also dramatise the conflict between economic and sexual emancipation.

The narrative voice in Zhang Xin's fiction celebrates the new economic power and possibilities that the era of reforms provides for women. But at the same time the narrative voice is fearful of the potential moral chaos in the wake of the new empowerment of women, and tempers over-enthusiasm by introducing tropes of madness and by referring to traditional ethics. The narratives dramatise how women succeed in their new roles as entrepreneurs but also depict them as the losers in the sexual and emotional domains. The female protagonists' quest for economic emancipation leads to broken marriages, lost friendships and hopeless love affairs. Their new sexual independence fails to bring fulfilment, creating instead feelings of frustration and loneliness and an emotional vacuum. The narrative voice warns of the dangers of the sexual and social liberation of women that their new-found economic freedom potentially entails. The warning of the loss

⁷⁰ Kuangren riji' 狂人日記 (1918), by Lu Xun 鲁迅, in *Lu Xun quanji* 鲁迅全集, vol. 1, ed. Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1982, 422-32.

of traditional ethics betrays a reactionary voice in these narratives that harks back to the traditional value system.

Gender issues appear as a double-edged tool employed to embrace modernity and also to propagate the need for moral values. In this sense Zhang Xin as a modern woman writer sounds surprisingly conservative. Her moral outlook orientates itself towards Neo-Confucian philosophy. The narrative voice in her fiction in particular reminds us of Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472-1529) school of thought and his reinterpretation of Confucianism.⁷¹ Wang Yangming for the first time in Chinese thought assigned the potential for sagehood not only to the literati but also to merchants and women, provided that they maintained their intuitive knowledge of what is morally right and possessed a good conscience. Zhang Xin's portrayal of women entrepreneurs, their economic success and emotional crises, implicitly proposes filling the moral gap left by the vanishing Communist world by a return to Neo-Confucian ethics.

On another level, these writings themselves appear as commodities of the consumer society, catering as they do to the tastes of the urban, and in particular the female, population. The rapid transformation of society has been reflected in the mood of neon light fiction. The earlier works from the late 1980s and early 1990s celebrate women as the star protagonists in the new material culture and map out possibilities of compromise between the old world and the new. The texts of the late 1990s, however, appear to perceive the role model of the female entrepreneur as fraught with identity crisis problems.

⁷¹On Wang Yangming's school of thought, see Wm. T. de Bary, 'Individualism and Humanitarianism in Late Ming Thought', in Wm. T. de Bary, ed., *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1970, 145-247; Shimada Kenji 島田虔次, *Chûgoku ni okeru kindai shii no zasetsu* 中国における近代思惟の挫折, Tokyo: Chikuma, 1949; Hou Wailu 侯外廬, *Zhongguo sixiang tongshi* 中國思想通史, vol. 4.2, Beijing: Renmin, 1960, 875-911; Ono Kazuko 小野和子, 'Jukyô no itanshatachi' 儒教の異端者たち, in Matsumoto Sannosuke 松本三之介, ed., *Taidô suru Ajia* 胎動するアジア, Tokyo: Heibon, 1966, 1-46.

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| HY | Tang Ying 唐穎. 'Hong Yan' 紅顏. <i>Shanghai wenxue</i> 9, 1995, 4-31. |
| JFOR | Zhang Xin. 'Jue fei ouran' 絕非偶然. In Zhang Xin, <i>Chengshi qingren</i> 城市情人, ed. Wang Shuo, Beijing: Huayi, 1995, 1-71. |
| JTML | Zhang Xin. <i>Jingtu molu</i> 驚途末路. Beijing: Qunzhong, 1996. |
| MLBF | Zhang Xin. 'Ni meiyou liyou bufeng' 你沒有理由不瘋. <i>Shanghai wenxue</i> 6, 1997, 4-25. |
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