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Haili Kong

Disease and Humanity: Ba Jin and His *Ward Four*: A Wartime Novel of China

Abstract “Family” as Ba Jin’s intense concern seems to be a central icon of his literary works, carrying through from his *Family* (1933) to *Cold Nights* (1947). After briefly reassessing Ba Jin’s literary contribution in his early phase, this essay will focus more on Ba Jin’s novels written in the 1940s, particularly his *Ward Four*, which rarely attracts critical attention. For Lu Xun, mental disease in China was more crucial than physical disease. Ba Jin uses both mental and physical diseases to explore humanity in a wartime hospital. Ba Jin’s early novels were infused with more radical ideas, but as a more mature writer in the 1940s he provided readers with a new perspective to explore and understand society.

Keywords Ba Jin, humanity, disease, family, trauma

Introduction

As we have now crossed the threshold of the new millennium and can look back upon the past century with greater detachment, we can perhaps only find a handful of literary writers in China who are still worthy of special attention. One of these is Ba Jin (1904–2005), who lived through the whole century and witnessed the incredible transformation of the old China through wars and man-made disasters. The lasting popularity of Ba Jin has surpassed that of most of his contemporaries. Ba Jin once claimed:

I am not a literary writer, nor do I understand art. The fact that I write does not indicate that I have talent, but that I have passion. For my motherland and countrymen I have immeasurable love that I express through my literary works.¹

¹ Ba Jin, *Zaisi lu*, 33.

Ba Jin's passion first drove him to become an advocate of social reform, anarchism, and the use of Esperanto, but later was vented through his literary writings, in his heyday which spanned the years 1929–47. His more than ten novels, including *Ward Four*, and numerous short stories made him arguably the most popular Chinese novelist of his time. His appeal to restore humanity in China after the notorious Cultural Revolution (1966–76) won him more respect and admiration, both at home and abroad.

Ba Jin (also rendered Pa Chin, original name Li Yaotang, alias Li Feigan) was born to a wealthy gentry family on November 25, 1904, in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan. The rigorous traditional education in his early years ironically made young Ba Jin rebellious and leaning toward the liberal. In his early teens, the May Fourth Movement further inspired and encouraged him to discard age-old traditions as well as to sever himself from his corrupt and suffocating family. He was passionately drawn to radical anarchism and considered the Russian anarchist Kropotkin (1842–1921) his spiritual idol. Later, in 1919, he was active in the Society of Equality, an anarchist group in Sichuan.

In 1923, Ba Jin left home for Shanghai. While continuing his interest in anarchism and writing for the anarchists' journal, *People's Tocsin*, he also became an advocate of Esperanto, which he thought might help fulfill his vision of utopia.

Ba Jin went to France in 1927, where he studied Western literature and accepted Western humanism. His successful literary debut, the romantic novel *Miewang* (Destruction), written while he was abroad in 1929, touched urgent social and moral issues that concerned most young intellectuals in China. However, these interests were leading him to become a literary writer rather than a radical revolutionary. His two-year sojourn in France fueled his enthusiasm for social justice and the pursuit of truth, which remained the core of his thinking and his social action. Before him there now lay a new horizon, and beyond it a new understanding of spirituality and the self.

Patriarchy and Family

Upon returning to Shanghai in 1929, he was welcomed as a promising young writer, and, from 1931–33, he published his first trilogy, *Love (Aiqing)*. His next novel, *Family (Jia)*, 1933, is the first volume of the *Turbulent Stream (Jiliu sanbuqu)*, and was a sensational success that immediately brought Ba Jin international recognition. Twenty years after its publication, *Family* had been printed thirty-three times, selling more than a hundred thousand copies.

More importantly, *Family* was translated into almost every major foreign language. With eruptive anger and scathing condemnation, this autobiographical

trilogy—the second and third installments *Spring (Chun)* and *Autumn (Qiu)* were published in 1938 and 1940—exposed the ugliness and immorality of the patriarchal system through its portrait of a declining gentry family. Almost all the younger members of the Gao family were looking for a way to break with the corrupt traditional family, but the social system offered no escape. *Family* is centered on how three young brothers react to the conflict between pursuing personal happiness and fulfilling family obligations.

Juexin, the eldest son of the Gaos, is portrayed as both a model, filial son and a victim of the family system, which caused the miserable deaths of two women he deeply loved, and forced him into an arranged marriage. Juemin, the middle son, rebelled against the patriarch, while Juehui, the youngest son, not only openly declared his opposition to the family, but also encouraged other members of the family to rebel. Juehui is portrayed as a student activist and fighter, imbued with the May Fourth spirit. Juehui's sympathy with the poor and the oppressed, and his passionate advocacy of equality and social justice largely reflect Ba Jin's own beliefs.

While Juehui exhibits many traces of Tolstoy's liberal and repentant nobles as well as Ibsen's concerns about gender equality in his famous play *A Doll's House* (1879), the setting of the novel resembles that of the Chinese classic *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1792), with the walled garden and the maze-like mansion, which has long been the symbol of domestic imprisonment.

Ba Jin's vivid representation of the servile status of women in *Family* and the misery resulting from arranged marriages provides a moving condemnation of this inhuman tradition. "I am also a human being," a female character repeatedly states. It is an echo of the cry for humanism and human rights during the 18th century European enlightenment movement. By this time in China, the idea of "Family"—a cultural icon and a sacred Confucian concept—was being seriously challenged.

Spring continues the family tragedy and the harsh criticism of patriarchy. The fruitless love relationships between cousins should rouse sympathy, but the lack of sophistication and the slowness of the story make the novel less powerful and less memorable than *Family*.

Autumn, however, is more mature and more sophisticated than the previous two volumes in the trilogy in its characterization and in the control of authorial subjectivity in narration, although it is much less popular than *Family*. Here, the author's optimism is disappearing, and his naiveté and simplicity in treating social and domestic dilemmas are replaced by sophistication and ambiguity. The division between good and evil is no longer determined by age, wealth, class, or the pattern of tradition versus modernity. The rather gloomy ending of *Autumn* marked an obvious transition that led Ba Jin toward greater maturity, in both his vision of life and the new direction of his literary creation during the troubled

1940s.

Disease and Humanity

As the War of Resistance worsened and the national crisis intensified, Ba Jin became a war refugee, wandering from place to place in southwest China. However, he did not stop writing. His next three novels, *The Garden of Rest* (*Qiyuan*) in 1944, *Ward Four* (*Disi bingshi*) in 1946, and *Cold Nights* (*Hanye*) in 1947, displayed a change in style and subject matter, and his range of artistic techniques was brought to its highest level.

Ba Jin's concerns were shifting away from grand revolutionary themes towards "Little People and Little Events" (the title of the collection of his short stories). Rather than a sweeping, passionate cry for rebellion, his meticulous descriptions of the apparently insignificant lives and daily concerns of office clerks, workers, and maltreated patients in third class hospital wards now fills his stories.

The Garden of Rest continues Ba Jin's criticism of the corrupt patriarchy seen in the *Turbulent Stream* trilogy. The difference is that the corrupting power of money, leading to moral degeneration and the ruin of the family, is here the focal point of the novel. Here, Ba Jin particularly shows his concern about the lost humanity of individuals. And for the first time, the family as a social unit is no longer the target of his criticism.

His last and, perhaps, best novel, *Cold Nights*, shows how a modern family—in this case, where the man and woman cohabit but are never legally married—falls apart. Unlike in Lu Xun's famous story, "Regret for the Past" (or "Remorse"), the failure of this union not only reveals the effects of economic pressures and clashes of personality, but also touches upon fundamental problems of the family structure and the impossibility of communication between individuals in an alienated, modern society.

In a departure from his early novels, intellectual narcissism and over-confident naiveté are replaced with self-criticism and unanswered puzzles. The tragic death of the insignificant clerk at the novel's conclusion is an elegy for the May Fourth spirit, but perhaps also echoes the author's depressed state of mind at the time.

During the composition of *The Garden of Rest* in 1944, a strong impulse came over Ba Jin to write of his miserable experience in a wartime hospital. Later, he would say that he could not obtain proper writing paper during that difficult time, and so he had to buy rough straw paper to write on with brush pen.² In 1979 he recalled:

² Ba Jin gave his original manuscript of *Ward Four* to the Shanghai Municipal Library to keep for public display.

I kept writing day and night. Mosquitoes and flies constantly came to bother me, but I just used a fan to drive them away and continued to write. The characters I wrote are big and sloppy, not neat at all. This shows how I dashed it off under bad conditions. This is not just my writing, but part of my life.

After the publication of *Ward Four*, however, Ba Jin seemed diffident about the work, stating repeatedly that it was a failure,³ though he was quick to add:

Nevertheless, I also want to say, I rather like it. The novel is a record of my life at that time.⁴

He later even claimed that *Ward Four* was one of the three of his novels that he admired the most (the others are *Family* and *Cold Nights*).

Why was this long-neglected and less popular novel so dear to the author himself?

According to Ba Jin, this hospital ward is “a dark corner” and “a microcosm of our society.” *Ward Four* offers a realistic picture of a maladministered hospital during the War, vividly represented through the eyes of the narrator, Mr. Lu (Lu XX as it appeared in Ba Jin’s own Preface, and Lu Huamin in later revision). The diary form creates a strong sense of realism in the narrative. By including detailed, at times even repetitive descriptions of the daily rounds of the ward, the irresponsible and snobbish attitudes of doctors, nurses, and other hospital workers, the nonsensical chatter, and the dirty, narrow and suffocating space, he achieves a convincing and wholly real portrait. The people in *Ward Four* are confined within this overcrowded, dilapidated building, tortured by endless fears and anxieties for their families and the War outside, and tortured too by the uncertainty of medical care in the hospital. The ward is presented as the field upon which life and death meet, the former flowing into the latter.

All the patients are conveniently called by their bed numbers. It seems as if human names are no longer necessary, because there is such constant transition, the patients appearing and disappearing, or dying. Humans are living in an inhuman environment, and lose their identities as well as their names. The patients in *Ward Four* are nameless, insignificant, and powerless, like prisoners. They are maltreated by nurses, doctors, hospital workers, and their own kin. Money plays an important role, as well, with the strange, almost surreal depiction of the First-Class Ward, in stark contrast to the patients with little or no money

³ Both in the second part of his foreword to *Ward Four* and his 1961 article “Remarks on *Ward Four*,” he made such modest statements, negative but also defensive.

⁴ Ba Jin, *Ba Jin quanji*, 488.

who are often insulted by the mean-spirited, sadistic staff. There is an element of both comedy and of pathos in these exchanges. Ba Jin recounted how this was based on his own experience:

I stayed in Ward Three of the Third Class Wards at the Central Hospital of Guiyang for a while in between May and June in 1944. I can't remember the exact dates of my stay, neither how many days I was there as patient. However, I feel I could still see clearly even with my eyes closed the setting and the daily life of patients, as well as the facial expressions and language of several doctors and nurses. Actually, I am not willing to remember these people and my experiences there for long. However, these impressions are too deeply left in my memories to be easily erased.⁵

Ba Jin had stayed in Ward Three rather than Ward Four. The reason why he changed the ward number was to imply that it was a “ward of death,” since four in Chinese sounds like the word for death (*si*).

Death in the hospital is an everyday occurrence. The meaningless chatting with neighbors serves as a daily ritual, sometimes a final communication between the dying and the living. The two are indistinguishable. When Lu, the narrator, shockingly discovers that his neighbor's bed is empty one morning, he cannot help blaming himself for ignoring the man's intimate final words the night before. He is overwhelmed by remorse for being unworthy of the trust that was placed in him.

As he indicated in his Foreword to *Ward Four*, Ba Jin was continuing his work in the “exploration of humanity,” questioning the human condition. Through the tedious routine of hospital life, he reveals how humanity can be distorted and suppressed.

Lu's failing gallbladder, the reason he is in the hospital, is not removed during his painful operation. All his suffering and anxious waiting has been merely another cyclic theme. This surprising turn of story seems bitter, sarcastic, and cynical. For the narrator, and perhaps for the other patients as well, the process of lying helpless in the hospital ward is like going through purgatory, witnessing the darkness of life and tempering one's will to survive:

I entered with a gallbladder, and was walking out with one. I didn't regret having my abdomen opened up without losing my gallbladder. I hadn't slept my way through these long eighteen days. No, I gained something in the process. But, if you asked me to answer what that was, I really couldn't say. If pressed, I could let the two little books be my answer. And, of course, I

⁵ Ibid., 487.

remembered what Dr. Yang said: “*It will make you kinder and purer. It will make you more useful to others.*”⁶

Though the narrator’s statement is genuine, its hopeful didacticism is mixed with cynicism.

Returning to normal life after this experience in the hospital, he should become kinder and purer because of his new understanding of life and death—or good and evil. However, a question remains as to exactly what “kinder and purer” here means. For this, it is interesting to further examine the role of Dr. Yang, the only example of an idealistic doctor in the novel.

Among the hospital staff and doctors, she is kinder and purer than the rest, patient, gentle, and therefore more useful to others, as she wishes to be. A special relationship is established between the narrator and Dr. Yang soon after they first meet. The mutual attraction may seem unusual, unreal. It is not a conventional love between a man and woman or between brother and sister. It is a relationship of the imagination, which Ba Jin attempts to use as an antidote to painful reality, and as an embodiment of his interpretation of humanity.

In his article “Remarks on *Ward Four*” in 1961, while emphasizing the overall truthfulness of the story, Ba Jin admits:

The Yang Muhua kind of doctor is not real. At least, I myself have never seen such a person, neither have I heard anyone mention a person like her.⁷

Although her charming smile and her dedication to her profession are based on two different doctors he saw in hospital, “Dr. Yang’s mind and spirit are entirely made up,” Ba Jin added. This was done for the purpose of adding some hope and brightness to this sad story. For Ba Jin, the main problem of the hospital is neither the bad facilities nor the low skills of the doctors, but the lack of humanity, although he added:

I did consider the doctors as saviors, and did wish they could give me some effective antidote so that my heart could be resting and peaceful.⁸

Obviously the imagined Dr. Yang represents hope and light in the darkness.

In the second part of his Foreword, Ba Jin implies that Dr. Yang died in an accident. Perhaps he was seeking to reassert realism by ultimately eliminating his idealistic angel. Or perhaps he was suggesting that it is impossible for such a

⁶ Ba Jin, *Ba Jin xuanji*, vol. 5, 203.

⁷ *Ibid.*, *Ba Jin wenji*, 424.

⁸ *Ibid.*, *Ba Jin quanji*, 492.

humane person to exist in this inhumane society.

Besides representing the ideal of a caring doctor, the other most important contribution of Dr. Yang to the story is the two books she gives Mr. Lu to read. These seem to be crucial for him in overcoming his illness and recovering his humanity. The two books, in the first edition of *Ward Four*, were *Three Hundred Poems from the Tang* and *Around Mr. Gandhi*. In later, revised editions, however, in order to avoid being accused of promoting Gandhi's ideas, Ba Jin switched the second book to Romain Rolland's multi-volumed *Jean Christophe*,⁹ a partly autobiographical novel about a German composer who criticized the society of his time and advocated intellectual freedom and humanism.

Gandhi and Rolland shared many common thoughts and humanistic ideas. However, compared to Rolland's cry for intellectual freedom and world peace, Gandhi's advocacy of passive resistance and non-violence in national liberation is perhaps closer to the thoughts of Dr. Yang, and indeed to those of Ba Jin himself. He was also a kind of pacifist, never taking his advocacy of humanism beyond writing, editing, and publishing, and other cultural activities. As an anarchist believer, he rarely participated in any political organizations, and he was not involved in the left-wing power struggles of the 1930s.

The other book, the *Tang Poems*, which represents the traditional esthetic values of China, is one that Ba Jin brought to hospital himself to help maintain his peace of mind. However, Dr. Yang's gifts were no more than a temporary comfort. Neither beautiful poems nor modern humanism could solve any of the real problems in the hospital, but, Ba Jin seems to believe, they could be enlightening and help to achieve a long-term spiritual healing. Nevertheless, Dr. Yang's—and Ba Jin's—goal of becoming “more useful to others” remains rather vague and unexamined.

The patients' nostalgia for home is another source of spiritual uplift, a means of keeping loneliness and fear of death at bay. A reunion with one's family seems to be everyone's only wish in the hospital ward. The dying Bed Six's dream of visiting his mother, and the narrator's thoughts of his father display feelings—care, regret, forgiveness—which are quite different from his anarchist treatment of the traditional family in the 1930s.

In particular, the final words of Bed Six, Zhu Yunbiao, once a rebellious son, who now regrets defying his mother's wishes and leaving home, and begs for her forgiveness, seem to be a counter-statement to Ba Jin's previous attitudes. The more mature Ba Jin had come to see that there were no simple radical solutions to the problems caused by the clash between modernity and tradition.

For Lu Xun, mental disease in China was more crucial than physical disease.

⁹ Romain Rolland (1866–1944) was a French author and Nobel laureate, and his *Jean Christophe* was very popular among young Chinese intellectuals at this time.

However, Ba Jin used both mental and physical diseases to explore humanity in a wartime hospital. Unlike in his early novels in the 1930s, Ba Jin in the 1940s provided readers with a new perspective to explore and understand society.

Ward Four, along with *The Garden of Rest* and *Cold Nights*, reflects a change in Ba Jin's style and themes—from passionate romanticism to meticulous realism, and from social critique to an exploration of humanity. His protagonists are also changed, from rebellious heroes to vulnerable mediocrities, his antagonists from patriarchs to misanthropes. He continued to focus on family matters and on the young intellectual's search for truth in the chaotic world of twentieth century China, but the narcissistic confidence of the young Ba Jin was replaced with greater self-examination. A sense of disappointment and confusion is discernible in his later novels, particularly in *Cold Nights*, which might have pushed Ba Jin further in refining his novelistic craft if he had not stopped writing novels in the late 1940s.

Great Writer and True Humanist

After 1949, although Ba Jin sincerely tried to adapt to the new society, he could not avoid becoming the victim of almost every single political movement, particularly the Cultural Revolution, during which his wife died. In the post-1976 era, the aging Ba Jin regained the courage to assert his independence, and resumed his humanist pursuits. His bold proposal for establishing a Virtual Museum of the Cultural Revolution in order to let the later generations remember one of mankind's greatest disasters, and his persistent advocacy of humanism and truth boosted his reputation considerably. He was given many literary honors and awards—from Italy in 1982, France in 1983, and the United States in 1985—and received an honorary doctoral degree in literature from the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1984.

Ba Jin will be remembered as a passionate novelist when young, and as an earnest advocate for humanism and intellectual freedom all his life. His panoramic view of the chaos in China in the first part of the 20th century, his capacity for reaching psychological depth in the character portrayal in his later novels, and his sensitive representation of the painful dilemma of Chinese intellectuals in facing the clash between tradition and modernity contribute to a better understanding of modern China, and will continue to have an impact for generations to come.

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