

ZOFIA JAKUBÓW-ROŚLAN

DI AN AND YAN GE:
CHINESE 80 HOU WOMEN AUTHORS
ON THE FAMILY*

Family has played an exceptionally important role in the Chinese literature throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. From the iconoclastic works produced by the proponents of the New Culture Movement all the way to the century's last decades when the most famous contemporary writers, such as Mo Yan 莫言 or Yu Hua 余华, decided to describe the upheaval of recent history through the lens of the family, it has been attracting the creative attention of Chinese writers. Sometimes, it was targeted as the object of fierce attacks; at other times, it was conceived as the source of hope, a site of reconstruction of values forfeited in the wake of political and social disasters.

The last major literary trend preoccupied with creating images of the family was the new historical novel.¹ Meanings ascribed to family in new historical

ZOFIA JAKUBÓW-ROŚLAN, PhD—University of Warsaw, Faculty of Oriental Studies, Department of Sinology; e-mail: zofia.jakubow@uw.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8212-6541>.

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¹ Kinkley defines new historical novel as “full-length historical novels (a few are novellas) that deny and defy previous national historical narratives, typically with a political edge that bears heavy implications for the present and future, and that also reflect familiarity with, even when rebounding from, magical realism, surrealism, fantasy, allegory, metahistorical questioning, parody, self-parody, pastiche, the absurd, and various experimental, dissociated, and nonlinear representations of time and plot that were avant-garde in 1980s China. China's new historical novels continue the meta-critique of Chinese culture characteristic of the 1980s, even as they construct new grand narratives of history in comprehensible, sometimes even mimetic forms” (Kinkley 7-8).

novels were best recapitulated by Jeffrey C. Kinkley (139-156), who claims that these literary works paint a bleak picture of the contemporary family. He distinguishes between two main types of narratives: one, in line with Chinese literary traditions dating back to the May Fourth Movement, depicts family as seemingly sound but internally decayed. The other one portrays utterly disordered families, unable to offer individuals any kind of shelter or comfort. In either case, the family is usually oppressive, especially to women. The primary villains are, also in a manner unchanged since the May Fourth Movement, fathers, who sometimes figure as allegories of the state (e.g. in Su Tong's 苏童 *The Boat to Redemption* 河岸). However, this time fathers are not just oppressive but often weak or even completely absent from the lives of their children. Sibling relationships usually appear in the form of rivalry between brothers, which contradicts both Confucianist and socialist ideals. Families depicted in new historical novels are plagued with violence and defined by moral degradation. Hope is only to be sought outside of the family in voluntary, friendly relationships. These tendencies were mitigated in the 1990s by a conservative wave in Chinese literature (Jakubów 139-155).

In contemporary China, one of the most important factors shaping ideals of the family is generation (Jankowiak and Moore, ch. "The Chinese Family: Enduring Ideals and Changing Realities"). Even though classifying writers based on their time of birth may seem controversial, terms like 70 *hou* 70后 ("after 1970", the term refers to authors born in the 1970s), 80 *hou* 80后 or 90 *hou* 90后 have been used ubiquitously in Chinese academia in the absence of a better classification of contemporary Chinese prose, which escapes labels and only seldom sees writers forming groups or subscribing to any explicit literary agendas. 80 *hou* authors (i.e. authors born in the 1980s) are supposed to be united in their (lack of) historical experience, specifically lack of memories of the Cultural Revolution, which greatly influenced senior generations of Chinese writers. Some common denominators can also be found within their literary production and modes of presence in Chinese literary circles (Zhang Y. 103-106, Wang G. 3-6). Many of them (including Yan Ge 颜歌) started their careers by participating in the literary competition Xin Gainian 新概念. Over the two decades of their presence on the Chinese literary stage, their thematic foci have shifted from realistic prose featuring big-city middle-class characters to include an interest in the life of smaller, local communities. Both Di An and Yan Ge set their stories in their native regions: Shanxi and Sichuan, in urban but not metropolitan milieus.

80 *hou* literature's thematic shift occurred against the backdrop of conflicting influences. In post-revolutionary China, neoliberalism has been competing with

residual Maoism, nationalism and Confucianist conservatism. Hui Faye Xiao (16-26) notices the appearance of “a global middle-class culture” in China and recognizes “a new popular culture capitalizing on domestic interiority” (17) as its part. She claims that under these cultural conditions, which arise as a neo-conservative response to the neoliberal influence, the energy of an individual is redirected toward “a new future-oriented project – building a better tomorrow not by socialist revolution but by investing in the reformation of the domestic interior” (Xiao 17). This may be achieved through consumption of commodities (interior design) but also through remodeling of the family and redefining the roles of its members.

Turning inward, into the family, allows an individual to escape grand social and political processes (Xiao 18-19, Tang 302-308). Among the Chinese, disruption of original networks of relationships has generated feelings of longing for the lost home. This longing is translated into longing for one’s own family: a utopia in its own right, imagined as “the modern nuclear family based on heterosexual monogamy” (Xiao 19), free from interventions by extended family or the state.

It is worth noticing that, in recent decades, Chinese families have started to function not just or even not primarily as economic but rather as psychological entities (Jankowiak and Moore, ch. “The Chinese Family”; Yan Y. 6-9). Affection has replaced duty and obligation as the basis of family relationships. Individuals seek emotional comfort within their families, and the families allow them more space to pursue their individual goals, exempting them from the traditional work for the collective good. This private model is replacing the previously dominant corporate model, which defined family as “an economic entity” and “an organization characterized by a common budget, shared property, and a household economy that relies on a strict pooling of income” (Yan Y. 3). The corporate approach also emphasized the family’s collective action and its place in the public domain, especially its ties to the economy and politics (Yan Y. 6).

The new domestic haven is feminized, guarded and managed by women (Xiao 21-26). The man is expected to be active in the space outside, defined by market economy, whereas the woman is the homemaker, the one managing domestic consumption as well as sexual and affective aspects of marital life. She is imagined as pure, uncontaminated by the dirty outside world. One can hence speak of “reconstitution of gender, family, and class relationships” (Xiao 26). The ideal post-feminist wife is dutiful but also young and attractive. A woman’s “over-liberation” (Xiao 26) may lead to marital strife and disruption of the family. It is worth noticing that the domestic, caregiving role of women is common to the middle-class ideal

described by Xiao and to the official party rhetoric, which, in this respect, harks back to Confucianist traditions (Zhu 13, Hird).

Di An's (笛安, pen name of Li Di'an 李笛安, b. 1983) novel *Xijue* 西决 was published in 2009 and has since been adapted into a television series, along with two other novels describing events in the life of the Zheng 郑 family (*Dongni* 东霓 and *Nanyin* 南音). It was one of the first works of the 80 *hou* generation to go beyond the common topics of adolescent, campus romance, youthful rebellion or fantastic adventures (Shi 2018; Cheng 40). The novel was praised by Chinese critics for its idealism, which was perceived in opposition to the crisis of values encountered in the writings of many other young authors (Wang D. 5). Di An was credited with creating an "idealistic spiritual homeland 理想主义的精神家园" (Cheng 40), turning to mainstream and traditional values but also confronting ideals with reality (Cheng 40-42, Zhao 129-131).

The novel is set in Longcheng 龙城, a northern, industrial city, modeled after Di An's hometown Taiyuan. The protagonist and the first-person narrator is Zheng Xijue 郑西决, a young teacher at a local high school. The protagonist holds an ambivalent position within the family. He is both an orphan, a product of the family's breakdown, and the pillar of the family: grandfather's only male grandchild. The deceased grandfather decided that his grandchildren should bear names related to the four corners of the world. The present form of the family is distorted, incomplete, but the will of the grandfather imposes an overarching order upon it. His decision concerning his grandchildren's names is mentioned at the beginning and at the end of the novel, serving as the frame of the characters' life stories.

The Zheng family breaks away from Kinkley's classification. It may be described as the reverse of his first type: the family is not "seemingly sound but internally decayed" but rather "seemingly decayed but internally sound". Family relationships seem disordered. Not only is the protagonist an orphan, but also his elder cousin Dongni is estranged from her parents, who are violent against each other. Moreover, Youngest Uncle 小叔 is divorced. Nevertheless, Xijue, Dongni and even Youngest Uncle all find comfort in the welcoming, warm home of Third Uncle 三叔, Third Aunt 三婶 and their daughter Nanyin.

The only sound nuclear family becomes extended to embody a hybrid of traditional and modern models. On the one hand, it brings to mind the traditional patrilineal, joint family: in the symbolic presence of the grandfather, his surviving male descendants and their offspring are brought together within a single household. On the other hand, the family is modern in that it is depicted as a psycho-

logical unit: a refuge, a community ensuring an individual's psychological well-being.

As a private haven, the Zheng family is partially compatible with the model described by Xiao. However, it must be stressed that it is by no means defined by middle-class consumerism. Di An advocates a plain, simple, even austere lifestyle. There are no mentions of interior design or other commodities the family purchases. Its members are always ready to sacrifice their comfort and live in cramped spaces to accommodate relatives in need (e.g. Dongni with her newborn child), and Youngest Uncle, depicted as an explicitly positive character, inhabits an austere room, without a kitchen or even a phone. The protagonist's long-term relationship is terminated when his girlfriend demands that they buy a new apartment.

Hui Faye Xiao notices that disruption of family life is easily attributed to women (Xiao 26). This is also the case in *Xijue*. Moreover, in the novel, female characters who destroy families are often linked to materialism, neoliberal market economy and the West. The character of Xijue is contrasted with that of his elder female cousin Dongni, a former hostess in Singapore and an owner of a chain of shops in Beijing, who eventually decides to marry a Chinese scholar living in the USA. The family disapproves of Dongni's lifestyle and fears that she might be a bad influence on the teenage, innocent Nanyin. Dongni, an ambitious and manipulative woman, often ridicules Xijue's choice to stay in Longcheng and live a simple life. She offends traditional morality with her promiscuity and disregard for her parents. Despite Xijue's encouragement, she even refuses to attend her father's funeral. Dongni is punished in a way reminiscent of new historical novels (Kinkley 142): she gives birth to a child with disability, which does not stop her from committing further transgressions. In the climax of the novel, Xijue resorts to violence when he discovers that Dongni beats her child.

Xijue's vision of the woman differs from the one described by Hui Faye Xiao:

When she reaches the age of her greatest beauty and sex appeal, ... when she has money, taste, when she is cultured and experienced, she might not be able to give the right kind of love to anybody.

一个女人到了最漂亮，最性感.....的年纪的时候，有可能有钱，有品位，有修养，有很多见识，但是说不定就拿不出来像样点的爱情来给别人了。(Di, ch. 7)

Physical attractiveness is added to the list of female traits that should be considered detrimental from the point of view of close relationship formation. *Xijue* surpasses Xiao's model in its conservative vision of women and can be described as reminiscent of Maoist puritanism.

Women are unreliable, so it is men's task to save their families. Xijue not only wants to have a family of his own, but he also wishes to protect his elders and cousins. He tells Dongni:

I only want to live a peaceful life in Longcheng, ... take care of Third Uncle, Third Aunt, Youngest Uncle and, of course, your parents. When you and Nanyin leave for foreign lands, and you have no luck in marriage, I will be maintaining this base camp for you ...

我只想平平安安地待在龙城，.....照顾三叔三婶，小叔，当然还有你爸你妈。等你和郑南音都远走他乡，并且婚姻不幸的时候，帮你们支撑好这个大本营..... (Di, ch. 2)

The image of fathers in the novel is ambiguous. The narrator often contrasts men's innocence and naïveté with women's cunning, manipulative nature. Many of the male characters (most notably Xijue and Youngest Uncle) are pictured as purehearted, righteous people, who desire to have families but are only seldom given the opportunity to act as good fathers. Men are often absent from their children's lives (Xijue's deceased father, Dongni's father and the father of her son), weak and unable to prevent women from destroying their families.

Yan Ge's (pen name of Dai Yuexing 戴月行, b. 1984) *The Chilli Bean Paste Clan* (originally *Our Family* 我们家, translated into English by Nicky Harman) was published in China in 2013. The novel is considered to be far less conservative in its message than Di An's writing, which provoked criticism from some Chinese scholars (Zhang B. 184-185) but won appreciation of some others due to the writer's reluctance to focus on moral judgements and her lack of a patronizing attitude to the reader (Chen and Xu 80). Yan Ge has also been praised for her literary technique, including skillful use of dialect, and for her interest in social problems. The literary space she has created provokes comparisons of her prose with Mo Yan's novels (Cui 175, Wang T. 83). The Chengdu-born writer describes the Sichuan town of Pingle 平乐镇. It constitutes "a mixture of the city and the countryside 城乡结合部" (Jiang 15), where social relations are still shaped by rural traditions, but the dominant lifestyle, especially its material aspects, draws on city culture.

The Duan-Xue 段薛 family portrayed by Yan Ge differs vastly from Xijue's Zheng family, but they share two important common features. First, there appears a similar generational distribution of characters: Xingxing (兴兴 or Duan Yixing 段逸兴), the narrator, belongs to the youngest generation, and most of the other characters, including the protagonist (Xingxing's father Xue Shengqiang 薛胜强), belong to the middle generation. Xingxing's grandmother appears as the single strong, dominating representative of the oldest generation. Second, the Duan-Xues also follow a combination of traditional and modern patterns of organization and functionality.

The patrilineal legacy is present in the form of family property: the eponymous chilli bean paste factory. Also, the narrative is focused on the narrator's paternal relatives. Grandmother serves as the head of the now partially disintegrated family. On the one hand, she seems to be the guardian of the family's integrity. She gives business-related advice to father, who is now the director of the factory, oversees her children's marriages and divorces, and gathers everyone for important occasions. On the other hand, she is portrayed as a willful, self-centered and hypocritical woman, who disrupts grandfather's funeral and even has an extramarital affair. This calls into question her and her seemingly steadfast generation's moral authority. Nevertheless, the younger generation lacks characters strong enough to enter into competition with the aging grandmother. Father keeps looking up to her, and uncle lives a solitary life in a different city, far away from the family estate.

It could be argued that the Duan-Xue family should also be described as "seemingly decayed but internally sound". The factory remains a strong institution within the town, and the family continues to be respected by the townsfolk despite some inner turmoil. One important difference in comparison to *Xijue* is that Yan Ge portrays a transformed, weakened but still functional corporate family (Zhang B. 186). The family members lack emotional closeness. They function within a structure that ensures them economic and social safety and serves as a part of a *guanxi* 关系 network providing even distant relatives with profit and opportunity.

The novel depicts some remnants of traditional family-related practices that have been assessed negatively by proponents of the modern nuclear family. For the Duan-Xues, one of the means of assuring a working *guanxi* network is through arranging advantageous marriages. Therefore, grandmother tasks herself with finding the right spouses for her children in order to connect their family to families of state officials. Another thing to mention is the protagonist's preference of his mother over his wife: father's closest relationship is to grandmother.

Xue Shengqiang is a local businessman who follows a lifestyle typical of his class (Osburg 37-75). Accepting some of its intrinsic elements inevitably results in marital infidelity. Businessmen often spend time together in night clubs in the company of sex workers. What is more, many of them support mistresses, which results in a form of contemporary concubinage. The narrator's father accommodates his mistress in the same building where grandmother lives, and he is quite happy when he finds out that she is pregnant. Mother tends to tolerate his affairs:

She goes to work, she plays mahjong, she reads her novels, she visits her father like a dutiful daughter, and when she wants to go shopping, she uses Dad's credit card. No

one gossips about them because, after all, she is the only woman in Pingle Town who is fortunate enough to have found a husband as rich and generous as Dad. (Yan G., *The Chilli*, ch. 10)

The narrator's mother does not expect a close emotional relationship with her husband. As part of a private nuclear family, their marriage should be considered a failure. However, as part of an extended corporate family, it is functional. The community of men formed through business and nocturnal gatherings proves more important than marital fidelity. However, it does not counter interests of the corporate family, which profits from extending and strengthening the *guanxi* network: father's business contacts are supposed to benefit the factory.

The balance of power between men and women is not explicit. Even though the social relations are ostensibly patriarchal, the novel does not lack strong female characters. Men enjoy more sexual freedom in Pingle Town: only they are allowed to keep mistresses and spend nights away from home. Still, both grandmother and mother have extramarital affairs, which initially cause an uproar but are ultimately forgiven. The most notable example of a woman's high status in the family is grandmother's authority. In professional life, there are no pronounced differences between men and women. Before father became the director of the factory, this position had been held by grandmother. All three siblings of the middle generation are successful in their jobs, uncle as a university professor and aunt as a TV presenter. The family takes pride in aunt's success. In this case, a woman's association with the big city and her cultivation of good looks provoke no negative judgement. Another thing that should be mentioned is the family's unusual practice of alternately giving their children grandmother's and grandfather's last names, which runs counter to patrilineal traditions.

While the Duan-Xue family's lifestyle incorporates more elements of consumerism than the routines of Longcheng's inhabitants, one cannot speak of full presence of Xiao's middle-class neoconservative family ideal in the novel. Consumerist influence is mostly noticeable in female characters' pastime activities. They enjoy shopping, driving expensive cars and watching modern television series. Xiao emphasizes that popularity of the neoconservative model is connected with disintegrating social networks and insecurities intrinsic to the market economy (19). Pingle Town retains working *guanxi* networks, so its inhabitants are not prone to feel anxiety associated with big-city alienation. The limited modernization they are subject to chiefly benefits women, who are given more freedom from restrictive traditional norms. Men accept changes rather begrudgingly: father bemoans the disappearing old vendors and changes in the appearance of the streets.

In the novel, Xue Shengqiang is usually referred to as Dad 爸爸, but he hardly ever acts in this capacity. His daughter, the narrator, is staying at a psychiatric hospital, and she is almost completely absent from the described events. Xue Shengqiang avoids involvement in her life, busy with his work and erotic adventures. Both father and grandfather are dominated by the mighty grandmother and choose to withdraw from the lives of their children. It can be stated that also in *The Chilli Bean Paste Clan*, the dominant features of fathers are weakness and passivity.

The absence of the narrator from the described events can be viewed as indicative of “a feeling of confusion in relation to their position within the family on the part of the 80 *hou* generation ‘80后’ 们对在家庭中的位置感到迷失” (Zhang B. 185). In the novel, lack of acceptance of the young by the older generation (symbolized by grandmother’s rejection of Xingxing) is correlated with disenchantment with the old family structures felt by the youngest generation (Zhang B. 185).

Di An and Yan Ge depict flawed or troubled families that defy coherent definitions, but their criticism of the family is much milder than its condemnation voiced by the previous generation of Chinese writers (Zhang B. 183-186). The families described by the two 80 *hou* authors are functional, either as private or corporate units. Notably, very few violent characters appear in the narratives, especially taking new historical novels as point of reference. This relatively positive trend in depicting the family may be considered as a continuation of the latest, conservative tendencies in the new historical novel.

However, both Duan Yixing and Zheng Xijue suffer from alienation. Yixing is estranged from her relatives due to her prolonged hospitalization, and Xijue struggles with his status as an orphan and his inability to start a family. This alienation may be associated with a sense of anxiousness caused by the lack of uniform patterns governing the contemporary family and a critical view of their fathers’ generation. Yan Ge and Di An’s conservatism is far removed from any historical conservative orthodoxies and can only be described as neoconservatism shaped by and contaminated with elements of diverse official and popular discourses of (post)modern China, including Western neoliberalism, residual Maoism and Confucianism.

80 *hou* literature reflects general tendencies discernible in popular culture only in part: Hui Faye Xiao’s neoconservative model is not fully endorsed in either of the novels. While there is no explicit criticism of consumerism in *The Chilli Bean Paste Clan*, it should be noted that the novel does not present the family as a private entity. Radical criticism of materialism and a very restrictive vision of

femininity can be found in *Xijue*. The fact that it has been adapted into television series might suggest that its message is highly compatible with official ideology of the CPC.

Even though both novels include elements of patrilineality, fathers are the weak points of the described families. In agreement with Jeffrey C. Kinkley's claim that fathers serve as allegories of the state in recent Chinese literature, these characters' weakness may indicate 80 *hou* writers' disillusionment with post-reform government, which is absent from citizens' lives, leaving them to fend for themselves.

Mild criticism permeating the narratives is balanced by the protagonists' passion for their families, which underlies and motivates their storytelling. It should also be mentioned that the novels present no alternatives to the institution of the family, no viable informal romantic relationships or friendships. Despite the modern family's numerous shortcomings and its troublesome hybridity, the authors cannot conceive of a society without it.

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S u m m a r y

Depictions of the family in 20th- and 21st-century Chinese literature have reflected the social and cultural discourses dominant in the country, especially Chinese intellectuals’ changing attitudes to tradition and modernisation. The last decades have seen China’s rise to economic prominence, accompanied by the increased influence of the neoliberal ideology, which has been met with a neoconservative response. A new model of the family has thus emerged. It has been imagined as a shelter from the unsettling realities of life under the conditions of the market economy, a private, consuming community managed by women. This paper focuses on the ways of describing the family in the novels by two well-known women writers of the 80 *hou* generation (authors born in the 1980s): Di An and Yan Ge. The image of the family in their prose has been compared to the private and neoconservative models and to the depictions of the family in the new historical novel.

Keywords: Yan Ge; Di An; contemporary Chinese literature; 80 *hou* authors; family; consumerism; neoconservatism

DI AN I YAN GE:
CHIŃSKIE AUTORKI 80 *HOU* O RODZINIE

Streszczenie

Przedstawienia rodziny w XX- i XXI-wiecznej chińskiej literaturze odzwierciedlają dominujące w tym kraju społeczne i kulturowe dyskursy, szczególnie zmienne postawy chińskich intelektualistów wobec tradycji i modernizacji. W ostatnich dziesięcioleciach, kiedy Chiny wyrastały na gospodarczą potęgę, wyraźne stały się tam wpływy neoliberalizmu, które wywołały neokonserwatywną odpowiedź. Pojawił się także nowy model rodziny definiujący ją jako schronienie przed trudami życia, warunkowanego przez gospodarkę rynkową, oraz prywatną, konsumującą wspólnotę zarządzaną przez kobiety. Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na obrazie rodziny wykreowanym przez Di An i Yan Ge – pisarki pokolenia 80 *hou* (urodzone w latach 80. XX w.) w odniesieniu do modelu prywatnego, neokonserwatywnego oraz do wyobrażeń typowych dla nowej prozy historycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Yan Ge; Di An; współczesna literatura chińska; pisarki 80 *hou*; rodzina; konsumpcjonizm; neokonserwatyzm