

MIMOSA

ZHANG XIANLIANG



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Mimosa

Zhang Xianliang was born in Nanjing in December 1936. During the political movement of the late 1950s he was labelled a Rightist and detained for over ten years. Following his rehabilitation in 1979, he became an editor of *Shuofang*, a literary magazine published in Ningxia. Later he joined the Chinese Writers' Association and was elected a council member of its Ningxia branch. He is now chairman of the Ningxia Chinese Writers' Association, a vice-chairman of the Ningxia Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

Zhang Xianliang's anthology of short stories *Body and Soul* was published in 1981. The title story won a prize and was subsequently made into a film. Another of his stories, "Bitter Springs" won a national prize in 1983. His novelette *Mimosa* has won wide acclaim since its publication in 1984.

Zhang X.....

Mimosa

and Other Stories



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Author's Preface

A society and a human being are much the same, in that only after they have matured can they genuinely reflect, can they have the courage to criticize themselves, to honestly and relatively objectively expose the mistakes and the naiveté of their earlier stages of development. In 1958, because we placed too much emphasis on the effect of the subjective will, the movement known as the Great Leap Forward was initiated, and we dreamt of soaring overnight into a "communist paradise". In reality, we had hardly even left the ground, and we paid the penalty exacted by economic laws and ultimately plunged into hell. A dreadful famine spread throughout the country. As *Mimosa* begins, this period of famine is already nearing its end.

I feel sure that readers will be able to understand this book. Although we do have our own special traditions and customs, readers will see that *Mimosa's* characters have exactly the same needs in life, the same desires and spiritual pursuits as they do themselves.

Mimosa is one part of an autobiographical series of novels and it describes the main character's experiences over a two-month period in 1961 when he is released from a prison camp and sent to a state farm. Zhang is a victim of the 1957 anti-Rightist movement and is persecuted in each of the succeeding political movements. But *Mimosa* does not express any condemna-

tion, nor does it express resentment or indignation. In China, the occurrence of this or that political movement cannot be blamed entirely on any particular person, just as our belief that similar kinds of political movements cannot happen again is not founded upon the verbal assurances of any particular individual. In a country with such a long history, and in such a backward state of economic development, modern political trends may superficially appear to be determined by particular people. In fact, they are governed by a variety of factors answerable to historical categories and not to individual human will. Now the majority of Chinese have emerged from that difficult stage. Consequently we cherish that historical period and must remember what we have learned from it. In *Mimosa* I have tried hard to bring the central character's particular circumstances to life, and in describing a small village in China's northwest, to incorporate a much broader range of social phenomena.

I have always felt that if a character is to be rounded and realistic, the author must not only describe his feelings, his character and his experiences, but also his ideology, his abstract mental processes. The problem lies in effectively integrating this ideology, this reasoning process and character with the contemporary circumstances. It seemed to me that Zhang could only find his lost identity and the meaning of life through the writing of Karl Marx. Some people have expressed doubts about this and have asked whether or not somebody who has been declared an enemy of the people and who hasn't got enough to eat can genuinely think of reading Marx, indeed can genuinely accept Marxism. They have asked whether or not this was done just to

make sure the book got published, whether it was the same old stuff. I think that one ought not to underestimate the readers' powers of imagination. In foreign countries, there is, apart from judges and lawyers, a group of people who assiduously study the law, i.e. the criminals who run the risk of being punished by it. In each of China's past political movements, intellectuals have always been first in the line of fire, and many of those who were declared "bourgeois Rightists", "anti-Marxist" or "reactionary academic authorities" were labelled as belonging to Marxist categories and punished. Whether in order to try and get out of the way to defend themselves or to come to some kind of individual understanding, these intellectuals all tried to determine in their own minds the true nature of Marxism. They did this with a thoroughness that would exceed that of any defence lawyer, because during that period almost nobody would come to the defence of besieged intellectuals. As a consequence, they incorporated both the status of criminal and lawyer in one, possessed twice the degree of enthusiasm. Marxism, however, is not a series of legal statutes, it is a philosophy of social struggle, a philosophy of the oppressed, and its powerful revolutionary enthusiasm proved to have an irresistible appeal and inspiration for intellectuals. Frequent political movements produced the dramatic effect of a Shakespearean comedy: the prosecuted became the prosecutor, the prosecutor the prosecuted, and intellectuals who had always been "enemies of Marxism" became genuine Marxists.

It should be explained that Zhang has only just begun to become familiar with Marxism. There is a point at which he thinks he genuinely is a "bourgeois Rightist"

and the book describes his inner confusion over the "theory of descent" popular at the time. This is a genuine psychological process. Political movements, in the guise of mass movements, used seemingly orthodox Marxist idioms to lend themselves validity, and the victim frequently had to sincerely believe that he had committed an "ideological crime" and repent. In order to eliminate this ideological pressure, it was necessary to show him the concern and attention of ordinary workers, who were honest and rational and who had great empirical experience in differentiating what was right from what was wrong. He was also required to understand Marxism in the way that a lawyer understands the law. Once he gained this understanding he would have a positive and critical world view and methodology; his consciousness could be raised from that of a criminal up on to a whole new plane.

Some readers may not understand the ending of *Mimosa*. This is because I want each part of this series to be able to stand on its own. Chinese readers like their stories to have a discernible beginning and end, and I must accommodate their tastes. All in all, the series will be divided into nine parts, and once it is completed, then the principal character's experience will be set out in chronological order. I plan to write one book every two years and estimate that I have a couple of decades of creative energy ahead of me. When the last part is completed, I will be able to use Marx's final line in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* as a conclusion:

"Dixi et salvavi animam meam."*

* I have spoken and saved my soul.

I hope that some of the people I met during my trip to Europe will read this translation. Through its imagery, the book can perhaps underscore some of my answers to the questions that were put to me about why Chinese intellectuals, who have suffered so much, are so unswerving in their loyalty to their country, and about the degree of liberalization in Chinese cultural life today. Now Chinese writers seek only authenticity, and whatever realities particular social phenomena may reveal, that is what they will write about.

Mimosa

“THRICE wrung out in water, thrice bathed in blood, thrice boiled in caustic.” This is Alexei Tolstoy’s description in Vol. II (1918) in his *Ordeal* of how hard it is for an intellectual to remould his thinking. Of course he had in mind bourgeois intellectuals brought up in tsarist Russia.

However, this description also applies to those of my generation who, like myself, indiscriminately absorbed feudal and bourgeois culture. So it occurred to me to write about a young Chinese from a bourgeois family, brought up on hazy notions of humanism and democracy, who after a long “ordeal” finally becomes a Marxist.

This book, entitled *The Making of a Materialist*, will consist of a series of nine novelettes. One of these, *Mimosa* is what I am now presenting to my readers.

I

The cart, after lumbering over a creaking hump-backed wooden bridge, reached the farm where we were to work.

Beneath the bridge the river-bed had dried up for the winter. The withered, frozen grass on either side was motionless. The soil scattered over the rickety bridge had been ground up by cart-wheels. The rushes spread

beneath were of different lengths, some of them jutting out to make the bridge seem wider than it really was. But the carter did not dismount, though his three panting horses floundered left and right, their eyes rolling, steam spurting from their nostrils. He remained seated upright on the shaft, gripping it between his knees as he drove steadily, expertly forward.

The horses were in no better shape than I was. One metre seventy centimetres in height, I weighed only 44 kilos, little more than skin and bones. When he weighed me, the doctor in our labour camp had congratulated me, "Not bad! You've survived." It seemed to him such a miracle that he felt entitled to share in my pride. But no one showed any concern for these three horses with their bony heads, scraggy necks and sunken eyes. As they strained forward, their gaping jaws showed gaps between their discoloured teeth. The mouth of one roan had been gashed, and the red blood trickling from it stood out sharply against the brown soil.

Still the carter sat on the shaft, staring grimly into the distance. The horses twitched their ears in desperation as he mechanically cracked his whip. The roan with the bleeding mouth looked particularly frightened, though the carter had no intention of lashing it.

I could understand the carter's callousness. Hungry? So what? While there's life in you, keep going. Hunger, far more terrifying than his whip, had long since driven all compassion from our minds.

Still, the sight of the emaciated creature made me ask:

"Master Hai, is it much farther to the farm headquarters?"

He completely ignored me, didn't even look contemp-

tuous — the greatest sign of contempt. His black padded jacket with its dozen or so buttons down the front reminded me of the coat of an eighteenth-century European noble. And he carried himself with dignity even though he only drove three scrawny horses.

I was so used to contempt, it couldn't dampen my spirits. Today I had left the labour camp to embark on a new life. As our political instructor said, I would now be supporting myself by my own labour. Nothing could depress me.

In fact we had only just reached the boundary of the farm where we were to work, and were still a long way from any settlement. There wasn't a building in sight. The boundary between this farm and our camp was a stream, yet setting off at nine we hadn't reached it till afternoon, judging from the sun's position. The soil on both sides of the stream was the same, but on this side was freedom.

The road was flanked by paddy fields. The tall stalks standing there had ragged tops, obviously reaped with blunt sickles. Were the farm-hands here the same as we had been, too lazy to whet their sickles? I didn't mind this, but was sorry that these weren't fields of maize. Then we might have scavenged a few kernels.

Too bad! No maize fields around here.

The sun was warm. Mist rising from the foot of the western hills was painting the rolling mountain ranges a soft milky white. The cloudless blue sky stretched as far as the eye could see, its colour gradually fading to a pale vaporous blue at the horizon. The bare fields were strikingly brown. I began to itch. Now that it was warming up, the lice were coming out from the