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# **The Family Novel in the Emerging Nation-State:**

**A Comparative Study of Ba Jin's *Jia* and Lev  
Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina***

**Part I: Sociologies of the Family**

**Part II: The Unhappy Woman in a Subversive Sisterhood**

**Part III: The Principled and Happy Life**

**Part IV: Two Banks of the Same River**

Adil D'Sousa  
Waterville, Maine  
12 May 2006

**Readers: Prof. Peter Ditmanson, Prof. Sheila McCarthy, Prof. Kimberly Besio**

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The theme of family in literature and in popular discourse occurs at times when the family as an institution is under attack. Attacks against the family coupled with defence of the family are viewed as the barometer of people's satisfaction with the society in which they live. This outpouring of emotion, whether it is in defence of or attacking the family, is the result of the family's position on the bridge between nature and society – a fortunate (or a detrimental) link between an individual and the units that make up a society. Across the United States and much of the western world, the battle for gay marriage and inclusive civil unions has revealed the fissures in our collective moral view of the family. The conservative concern about the absence of 'family values' is magnified by our situation in a world of flux. Inflation, war, terrorist threats, and the depletion of natural resources are but a few examples. When so much is unknown, how do we position ourselves? What anchors us to the past, gives us comfort in the present, and supports us in the future if not the family? Alternatively, what coddles us more in the past, shackles us more to the present, and lulls us more into a fixed conception of the future than the family? My research is not a sociological survey into the family nor does it stake any claims to understanding the present state of the family in society. The study seeks, however, to shed light on the rhetorical uses of the family by analysing two novels that are inextricably concerned with the theory of the family in times of heightened social

change. In particular, my research focuses upon the social role and political meaning of the family in *Anna Karenina* and *Jia*.

### Part I: Sociologies of the Family

Ba Jin's *Jia* and Lev Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* encompass many themes. Like all works of literature, intrigues, plots, and characters abound in both novels. For our purposes here, we will examine two of the most striking aspects of the novels: the theory of the family; and the nexus between the individual and the state. In terms of a theory of the family as an institution, both authors follow, relatively speaking, a similar narrative (based upon family interactions, power relationships, the family in the context of society, retreating from society, etc.) but end up with vastly different sensibilities of a new world. Tolstoy advocates for a return to a glorious Russian past while Ba Jin envisions a new and dynamic China. Their differing views of progress and of the family's place in society are undoubtedly shaped by their experience of history. Russia in the late nineteenth century and China in the early twentieth century are the sites for political and social discussions about, among other things, the phenomenon of nationhood. Both societies are moving from a traditional-state,<sup>1</sup> where the family plays a central political role, to a nation-state, where the family plays a peripheral, apolitical, and often problematic role. In other words, the changing orientation between the individual, the family unit, and the state forms the context within which Ba Jin and Tolstoy theorise about the family. This chapter outlines the ways in which the political atmosphere of 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The terms "traditional-state" and "nation-state" are hyphenated to distinguish the meanings of traditional-state and nation-state employed here from other uses of the same terms.

century Russia and 20<sup>th</sup> century China contributed to the popular success of the two novels as family novels despite their differing views on the question of “what must be done.”

Lev Tolstoy advocates for a return to an organic, Russianised family. Levin, the character we can most closely associate with Tolstoy's personal philosophy, argues in favour of the way things used to be. His house, where his ancestors have lived for generations, is a museum to the past. The furniture has been preserved. The household's daily routine is unchanged by the death of Levin's parents. Even though he has no family (at the beginning of the novel), he uses all the rooms of the house, living as though life itself has not been altered by the passing of time. Levin's manner is also a bow toward the goodness of the past. He is honest, he has a sense of pride, his passion is immediate and genuine, he skates gracefully with Kitty across the pond, and he is uncomfortable among devious people. Levin is a relic of the past. Through Tolstoy's sympathetic treatment of Levin and Levin's marriage, we are introduced to the idea of a wholesome, Russian family of the past. It is a family in which hard work in the fields is encouraged, in which help is never withheld, and in which love is earned through devotion. The ideal family, then, is a romanticized Russian family of the past.

Conversely, Ba Jin points out the failings of the traditional Confucian system of relationships and of oppressive government. Instead, he envisions possibilities for a new future. Ba Jin's vision for the future of the family relies on a new generation of youth, rather than on converting the older generations. He criticizes the older generations not in order to motivate them to change, but as an instructive lesson to the younger generations.

The author's main character, Juehui, talks about how unlikely his older brother, Juexin is to reform:

It was a tragic truth that for people like Juexin<sup>2</sup> there was not a shred of hope; they were beyond saving. Bringing new ideas to them, opening their eyes to the true aspects of the world only intensified their misery. It was like resurrecting a corpse and letting it view its own putrefying flesh.<sup>3</sup>

This sentence against the older generations is important because it describes the relative utility of the new versus the old. The old is to be destroyed, while the younger generation will build in its place. The older generation is connected with ideas of stagnation and dependence on formalized structures while the younger generation is implicitly envisioned in terms of its flexibility and vibrancy. The younger generation of the Gao family devours *New Youth* magazine and the brothers are also involved in disseminating progressive ideas through their own newspaper in order to suggest new ways of looking at politics. Unlike Tolstoy who claims an intrinsic Russian-ness to his vision of the family, Ba Jin valorizes the influence of the West. The younger generation is the first generation that is schooled outside the walls of the family compound. Their education is a diet of Schiller, Turgenev, Balzac, and Tolstoy. Through western influence, Ba Jin imagines a new society radically different from the one he lives in. His ideal family is progressive, educated, and most importantly, modern. The ideal family would respect the emotional needs of all its members. It would not be built upon the rigidities of the Confucian system but would be newly conceived as an institution of the future.

Although Tolstoy advocates a return to the ideal Russian family and Ba Jin promotes moving towards a liberal western conception of the ideal family, neither writer presents simplistic caricatures of the East or of the West. Through subtle literary

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<sup>2</sup> Although Shapiro's translation of Ba Jin uses the Wade-Giles system of romanization, I have formatted all characters' names in *pinyin* for consistency.

<sup>3</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 112

architectonics and an unlikely linking of characters, Tolstoy uses the family novel, an arguably western model, to emphasize what must remain uniquely Russian in the traditional family. Similarly, although Ba Jin writes as an anarchist in the tradition of his namesakes Bakunin and Kropotkin,<sup>4</sup> he is essentially concerned with the very Confucian and traditional Chinese notion of how to create an ideal family as a vital part of creating an ideal society. Characters in both novels wrestle with the theme of western influence (the use of French in *Anna Karenina*,<sup>5</sup> allowing co-educational schooling in *Jia*) just as their authors wrestle with the extent to which that which exists must be preserved. In the Russian context, for example, striving for an essentially Russian concept of the family necessitates bracketing (that is, forgetting) centuries of European influence and civilization. In the Chinese context, occidental ideas about the status of the family must compete with centuries of Confucian practice. The family novel as a genre of fiction allows a greyscale presentation of the ideal family, often created by negative example. Just as the relationship between the East and the West is a complex and evolving one, so too is the institution of the family.

The complexity of the family as an institution in these times of historical change is not simply a question of the forces of Eastern and Western ideology. The theory of the family is inevitably caught up in the changing relationship between the individual and society. From a traditional society in which the family mediates between each family member and the traditional-state, the nation-state's preferred relationship is a direct one with the free citizen. The diagram below briefly illustrates the changing relationship:

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<sup>4</sup> The author of *Jia* published under the pseudonym Ba Jin, which is the *pinyin* romanisation of Bakunin's and Kropotkin's names in Chinese.

<sup>5</sup> French was the preferred language of the aristocracy in nineteenth century Russia. Many of the Russian nobility were schooled abroad in France and thus were often unable to communicate in Russian. In Tolstoy's work, the use of French suggests pretence – a false understanding of life.

Individual → Family → Traditional-State  
(member of the family unit)

Individual → → → Nation-State  
(citizen)

The key difference between the changing relationship between the individual and the state is that the family is removed as a political unit. The family cannot be abandoned completely for it is still a useful (to many, a necessary) unit. But the family's political power is certainly threatened by the emergence of a nation-state.

The changing relationship from a society mediated by the family's influence to a society with a direct relationship between the individual and the nation-state is explored by Tolstoy through his politically-minded character, Koznyshev. As the Zemstvo (a parliament largely comprising the gentry) deliberates, we hear Koznyshev explaining the job of the new Marshal of the Province in the context of the nation. The debate in the Zemstvo has already shifted from a simple relationship between family and traditional-state to a much more direct relationship between the individual and the nation-state.

Koznyshev sees the individual's character as indicative of the nation's health:

It was necessary to put in place a new, up-to-date, practical, and quite modern man, and to manage matters so as to extract...all the advantages of self-government...In the wealthy Province of Kashin, always ahead of all others, such forces were now assembled that, if matters were here managed as they should be, it might serve as an example to the other Provinces and to the whole of Russia.<sup>6</sup>

The implication of such a view is that one may simply multiply the 'modern' man to achieve the 'modern' state. While talking to Levin, Koznyshev remarks that "the principle task of philosophy has always, in all ages, been to find the necessary connection existing between personal and general interests."<sup>7</sup> While philosophers would object to such a simple definition of philosophy in terms of a 'task,' what is more important for our

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<sup>6</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 586

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 225



purposes here is the scopophilia at play. The nation is invisible, amorphous, perhaps even imagined,<sup>8</sup> but the individual is something one can point at, speak to, and *discover*. Thus, according to Levin, the individual is the site of information-gathering from which false 'general interests' may be extrapolated. Tolstoy seems to be setting out one of the problems of the nation-state: namely, its susceptibility to forming general assumptions based on the sum of individuals. The nation-state's desire to rewrite the past as a historical project, which has been fulfilled by the creation of the nation-state itself, ensures the destruction of all intermediary institutions, including the family. While Tolstoy accepts that the nineteenth-century family is in a state of crisis, he is wary about destroying it and embracing a new system that consists of such a direct (and potentially disastrous) relationship between individual and nation-state.

While Tolstoy focuses on the problems associated with the emerging nation-state, Ba Jin is very reluctant to embrace the traditional-state. He uses the Confucian idea of the family as a microcosm of the state to illustrate the problems with the traditional-state and the merits of the newly emerging nation-state. The Gao family in Ba Jin's *Jia* lives in a residential compound flanked with the Confucian directive: "*benevolent rulers, happy family; long life, good harvests.*"<sup>9</sup> The characters pass the sign several times during the novel, each time noticing its 'red veneered plaques' – a constant reminder of the motto under which the Gao family stakes its integrity, its aspirations, and its connection with the world outside the compound. The phrase is significant because it not only connects 'benevolent rulers' to 'happy families' but also because it implies that *only* under the above conditions will one be able to live both a long life and enjoy good harvests. The

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<sup>8</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso: New York, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972, pg. 13

phrase, then, advocates the primacy of having good rulers who then maintain happy families, whatever being happy may constitute. The family is the mediator between the individual and the state, maintaining the cultivation of individuals and so ensuring the happiness of the state. *The Great Learning* shows a clear precedent for such thinking:

Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.<sup>10</sup>

The onus is very much on the localized structure of individual and family to create happiness that will then be reflected onto the state apparatus, although the ruler and the state must in a sense preserve what is generated by their responsibility to the smaller units of family. One of the differences between modern and traditional Chinese literature, between the novels *Hong Lou Meng* (written by Cao Xueqin in the sixteenth century) and *Jia*, for example, is the modern way of looking at family as a systemic problem that individuals participate in through necessity, whereas traditional literature presents problems as the individual's inability to conform to a perfect system.<sup>11</sup> For the nation-state, the political power of the family is problematic because it sometimes occasions a division of loyalty. *Ba Jin* shows us the flaws inherent in the traditional family and, by extension, the state, and advocates for a new relationship between the individual and the nation-state.

The nation-state is a central unit of control but it also gives individual citizens a measure of civil autonomy. It occupies the curious liminal space between centralised and

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<sup>10</sup> Loomis, Rev. A. W. *Confucius and the Chinese Classics: Readings in Chinese Literature*. Lee & Shepard: San Francisco, 1882, pg. 131

<sup>11</sup> Louise Edwards writes that in *Hong Lou Meng*, for example, upsetting the social order of women inside the home and men outside the home is instructive as a cause for sexual deviance within the family. The family self-destructs because it strays from the traditional path of an ideal family. The family novels of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia and early 20<sup>th</sup> century China are more concerned with the relationship of the traditional family system to the influences of modernity and the nation-state rather than adherence to any set of rules governing the function of the family.

decentralised institutions. Similarly, the family is both a centralized and a decentralized institution. It is centralized in the context of the individual's relationships to outside entities, but it is a decentralized offshoot of centralized government. Both the traditional-state with its dependence on the family as a mediator and the nation-state with its direct link to the individual-citizen are highly effective forms of social control, coercion, and, once in power, both systems work to maintain the status quo. Tolstoy rejects the modern move toward the nation-state because of the dangers the nation-state poses to ordinary people. The nation-state, as represented by the clever words of the Zemstvo leaders, only makes a pretext of working for the people while it is in fact just another venue for the so-called liberals to speak and be heard. Ba Jin rejects the traditional-state because of its entrenched, insular practises. For him, the traditional-state is the primary obstacle to meaningful change and only its destruction will ensure a better future for China.

The family as an institution of oppression is central in *Anna Karenina* because Russia finds itself on the cusp of political and social change. By 1877, the reforms of the 1860s had begun to slow and the preliminary effects of emancipation began to change the social fabric of the Russian way of life. Questions of nation and family simmered to the surface of discourse and writers mulled over its origins. The roots of Russian nationalism are often attributed to the French Revolution and the vast political upheavals that supposedly signal the advent of modern nationalism. But this focused way of looking at the origins of nationalism in terms of historical events does not coincide with the purposes of our inquiry. For our purposes, the concept of nationalism begins much earlier with the legitimacy that nation-states sought during the European Renaissance. One way of analyzing the roots of nationalism is to look at when patriotism became a defining

word in western political debate.<sup>12</sup> This occurred in the mid-seventeenth century with the publication of Bolingbroke's *The Idea of a Patriot King* where a true patriot is not someone who is concerned with notions of self and relationship to God, nor is a patriot someone who chases money. A patriot is one who is in *direct* contact with the people he lives with. The patriot-king is one who is directly in contact with the people. This is perhaps the first indication that the model has changed from a family-state paradigm to an individual-nation relationship. In the Russian context, the idea of the nation-state was popularised by growing dissent against the monarchy. Writers like Tolstoy in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, returning to their traditional role as stewards of the people, raised an important question: what is the role of the family in this newly conceived notion of the nation-state? Tolstoy is deeply uncomfortable with the institution of the family as he saw it. His depiction of the family in *Anna Karenina* and his use of the family novel as a genre connects his work with the writers of the European Renaissance.

Although Tolstoy's novel appears to be the continuation of the literary tradition of love novels influenced by its French antecedents, *Anna Karenina* is not another *Madame Bovary*. In many facets of its construction, the complex moral problems Tolstoy presents are more reminiscent of Pushkin's subtle suggestion than many of the more aggressively didactic works of Western Europe. One of the reasons for the complexity of moral questions is the entangling of the characters themselves. Tolstoy wrote to the critic S. A. Rachinsky: "I take pride in the architectonics. The vaults are done in such a way that one cannot even notice the place where they are linked."<sup>13</sup> The strands of the novel flow

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<sup>12</sup> During, Simon. "Literature – Nationalism's Other?" in *Nation and Nation*, ed. Bhaba, Homi. Routledge: London, 1990, pg. 140

<sup>13</sup> Tolstoy, L. N. *Russkie propilei* (Moscow, 1916), Vol. 11, p. 267, cited in Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 778

separately, only occasionally entangling before being pried apart again as though by an impatient knitter. The points of entanglement (when Anna meets Levin, when Stiva Oblonsky meets Serezha, when Vronsky meets Koznyshev and so on) are thus heightened. Boris Eikhenbaum writes that, aesthetically, the novel consists of a series of “dialectics”<sup>14</sup> that are the result of the author’s own intellectual processes. Anna Karenina does not die in childbirth but lives because Tolstoy cannot simply kill her off. Reprieved from the brink, her story becomes the fabric upon which a complex moral dilemma is painted. In this sense, the novel does not follow the European traditions “as much as it brings them to a head and goes beyond them.”<sup>15</sup> The novel’s structure, then, is about adding a certain Russian quality to the raw material from the West, thereby creating another link in the Hegelian dialectic. It is a new link. It is a link influenced by a Russian author and a Russian way of life.

In the Chinese context, Confucian ideology is opposed to the creation of the nation-state. Confucianism stresses self-improvement based on filial piety while society functions on a broad understanding of moral tenets administered by officials who take exams in the moral philosophy they then adjudicate by. According to Confucianism, it is a moral sin to overthrow the traditional state. Ba Jin’s *Jia* is part of the new literary circle of the May Fourth Movement. This group of writers, including Lu Xun, is opposed to the structures of the traditional-state. In *Jia*, when Juehui is forced to read a book on Confucian morality, he tears it up both as a protest against the philosophy and a rebuff of his grandfather’s control. It is both a public statement of disgust at the ideology and a private rebellion when he gets so mad that he rips the book to pieces, proudly leaving the

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<sup>14</sup> Eikhenbaum, Boris. *Lev Tolstoy: Semidesyatye gody* (Leningrad, 1960), cited in Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 779

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 779

world “with one less copy of that book...[so that] a few less people will be harmed by it.”<sup>16</sup> Ba Jin’s eagerness to destroy the traditional-state and its reliance on Confucian ideology is coupled with his fervour in envisioning a new nation-state. His contemporaries, Sun Yat-sen and Zhang Binglin, for example, suggest that traditional Chinese society was mired in a system of loyalties between the individual, the family, and the local community. This left China lacking the cohesion that the ideology of a western nation-state afforded. The reformer, Liang Qichao, took a more moderate view. In “Renewing the People,” he writes that the nation-state must be unique and that literature and moral institutions must be put to use in creating this uniqueness:

When the nation can stand up in the world its citizens must have a unique character. From morality and laws to customs, habits, literature, and the arts, these all possess a certain spirit...Our people have been established as a nation on the Asian continent for several thousand years, and we must have some special characteristics that are grand, noble, and perfect, and distinctly different from those of other races. We should preserve these characteristics and not let them be lost.<sup>17</sup>

There does seem to be, then, the perception that in order to develop, the nation-state must hold on to some of what differentiates it from other nation-states. Ba Jin and other revolutionary writers reject the reforms of Liang Qichao and promote a radical view of the family as an institution situated in the nation-state.

But it is not sufficient to say that Ba Jin advocates for a nation-state in the western model. As much as Ba Jin touts a western-based radical philosophy, he is absorbed with the question of how to create an *ideal* state – an utterly Confucian preoccupation. To tackle the state, the author looks at a microcosm of it – the family – and posits the destruction of the traditional family as a prerequisite for reconstructing the modern state. In yet another bow to traditional Chinese Confucian thinking, Ba Jin writes a novel about

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<sup>16</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 86

<sup>17</sup> Liang Qichao “Renewing the People” in DeBarry/Lufrano. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. Columbia University Press: New York, 1999, pg. 289-290

it! He thereby fulfils the traditional role of writers as the gentlemen (*junzi*) who comment and pass judgment on society. Thus, although the novel's protagonist advocates the western ideals of modernism and the destruction of decadent traditional Confucian life, the novel itself is firmly situated in the essentially Confucian paradigm of the family as a microcosm of the state. Modern ideology is expressed through a traditional exploration of the questions surrounding state, family, and the gentleman-writer's place in relating the two. It appears that although Ba Jin's content is a radicalised western view of the family, his form is a traditional Confucian exploration of the questions of family and state by an educated writer who feels a duty to participate actively in governance of the state.

The older generation's reverence for Confucian theory manifested in *Jia* is seen in *Anna Karenina* as Karenin's reverence for the law. Tolstoy is very concerned with the nation-state's preoccupation with the written word. The written word is seen as sacred, inviolable, the zenith of truth. Numerous committees pay homage to the written word in their long, superfluous reports and even longer and more banal titles. Aleksei Karenin believes that the word (that is, the 'reasoned' word) has been objectively wrought not through human thinking but through the intercession of some greater force. In the following passage, Karenin speaks of the superiority of a document prepared to answer questions about the 'subject-races', that is, minority ethnic groups in the far-eastern provinces:

All the questions had received splendidly-drafted answers: answers not open to doubt, since they were not the result of human thoughts (always liable to error), but were the outcome of official labours. All the answers were based on official data...therefore these answers could not admit to any doubt.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 337

The last line is the most interesting for it shows us that although Karenin believes that these laws and edicts about the 'subject-races' are invested with a perfection of sorts, he does concede that the answers cannot *admit* to any doubt (even if it is true to do so) for to admit to doubt is to undermine belief in the system, in officialdom, and perhaps even in the infallibility of governance. Tolstoy is unable to accept Karenin's proposition of the superiority of the written word above the instincts of the people, casting Levin as the author's mouthpiece against word-creating institutions like the Zemstvo. He does not openly advocate Christian anarchy – albeit the character most like Tolstoy in philosophy and action, Levin, does believe in anarchy – but questions why we put so much faith into the written word.

Ba Jin is not nearly as afraid of the written word. He is confident that the nation-state's inception will be brought about by the overthrowing of power. The main character, Juehui, demonstrates his revolutionary zeal by breaking a small branch off a tree:

Breaking off a small branch, he snapped it into sections, then plucked off the blossoms and ground them to a soggy pulp between his palms. His hands, stained yellow with the juice, were steeped in perfume.

This act of vandalism somehow satisfied him. Some day, when his hands were bigger, if he could crush the old order between them in the same way, how wonderful that would be... You can lock up a person physically, but you cannot imprison his heart.<sup>19</sup>

He suggests that by crushing the branch, he is demonstrating the power of individuals to change traditional, entrenched system of beliefs. But Ba Jin does not allude to the state of affairs after a modern nation-state has gained power. Which forces will become the forces of reaction? Will dissent and noncompliance be permitted? These questions receive no answers in *Jia*, perhaps because the novel is written specifically in support of change in the direction of the nation-state and should not be construed as a greyscale plan for the future. In this respect, Ba Jin differs from Lu Xun who was much

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<sup>19</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 70



more circumspect about the role of western influence and what China stood to lose from destroying past tradition.

One of the consequences of the newly emerging nation-state, according to Tolstoy, is that there is no formal regulating mechanism between those who govern and those who are governed. Informal lubricants exist: publishing firms, investment capital, etc. But there is no institutionalized structure through which the state and the individual meet. This causes urban unrest. Levin travels to Prussia, France and England, staying in manufacturing cities rather than the capitals of these nation-states. Stiva Oblonsky believes that Levin now has an idea of how to solve 'the working-class problem'. But Levin replies that, "In Russia there cannot be a working class problem...the question turns on the relation between the labourers and the land."<sup>20</sup> According to him, western states have already 'been spoilt' because they have built mammoth institutions to the nation-state, taking away man's most important relationship to the land and to the family. Levin imagines a new and distinct Russian solution, not unlike the political solutions Tolstoy advocated in his own life.

The authors' differing view of progress is one of the most important distinctions between Tolstoy and Ba Jin. Tolstoy looks to restore utopia-in-antiquity by separating the Russian wheat from the western chaff. Ba Jin embraces general western ideas of progress and his project is that of preparation for a new future. Thus, the literary projects of both authors are not alike: Tolstoy imagines the past as containing something essentially good in the Russian *narod*, while Ba Jin's project is preparation for a completely new future loosely modeled on western philosophical ideas of progress. While this section has focused upon the historical and political forces that influence the authorial view in both

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<sup>20</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 341

novels, the next section will center on the ideas the protagonists bring to the novels. Part II is a more textually-based analysis of the position of women within the family, their education, and their options for withdrawal from family life.

## Part II: The Unhappy Woman in a Subversive Sisterhood

Theorising about novels, the family, the family's situation in the novels, the state, the state's relevance to the family, and so on, are problematic if they are not based on textual analysis. Without the novels themselves, theories about novels are common moulds. Theory becomes a form of Xeroxing and the life-source of literary works is trampled when fitting them into highfalutin theories. Frank Lentricchia says that, in post-modern interpretation, a lack of connection to the text has become fashionable. It is a case of "tell me your theory and I'll tell you in advance what you'll say about any work of literature, especially those you haven't read."<sup>21</sup> Bearing this in mind, in the present chapter we will concentrate on one common theme in the novels – the unhappy woman – and show how each author presents this unhappiness as symptomatic of the family's unhappy condition. In *Anna Karenina* and in *Jia*, women are perceived as property and their position is linked to their male relatives. Their only option to escape from the matrix of patriarchal domination is to escape from the bonds of society itself, that is, to take their own lives.

Women's education is the topic of much discussion in both novels. In *Anna Karenina*, the liberal Pestsov introduces us to the connection between women's education

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<sup>21</sup> Lentricchia, Frank. "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic." *Lingua Franca* 6.6 (1996) pg. 59

and women's rights. While conversing with Karenin, he suggests that the "subjection of women is so widespread and so old that we often forget to recognize the abyss that separates them from us."<sup>22</sup> As long as people like Karenin continue to dodge the issue of women's education by suggesting that they are not opposed to women's education *in principle* while adding numerous caveats, the issue will remain unresolved. Pestsov says that the deprivation of women's rights is inseparably bound to their level of education. Interestingly, although Anna does not involve herself in education (she explains to Dolly that education is not her passion and that only passions can be pursued with any success), she is deeply involved in intellectual works on society, philosophy, and progress. Society cannot close the doors on her interest in artists and painting. In fact, it is society's deprivation of her right to love freely that motivates her immersion in self-taught learning. Her absorption in books makes her a charming host and a learned interlocutor. Tolstoy suggests that even in a so-called modern nation-state, education is not gifted to women. Their level of education remains a consequence both of their position within the family and their family's position within the nation-state.

In *Jia*, the probability (or lack thereof) of the foreign-languages school becoming co-educational charts Qin's emotions. She is saddened at the absence of a concrete proposal to integrate female students and is overjoyed whenever the prospect seems inevitable. Apart from being the object of Juemin's desire, Qin also becomes a symbol of emancipation. However, she must fight against a system so repressive that even Juehui, ever the radical, is skeptical about reforming:

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<sup>22</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 353

Szechuan has entirely too many feudal moralists, and their influence is very strong. They're sure to oppose this thing. Boys and girls in the same school? That's something they never thought of in their wildest dreams!<sup>23</sup>

In many ways, the desire for education is likened to the desire to be a part of society.

Without an education, Chinese women are consigned to follow a path proscribed by men and dictated by past tradition rather than by feeling. In heartfelt conversations with Qian-zhu, Qin reveals the precarious nature of her own mother's position as a single parent without male relatives to support her. Qin's mother feels she must act in accordance with the wishes of her closest male relatives not simply out of a desire to keep the kin together but also because without them she has no power. For Ba Jin, the novel *Anna Karenina*, which he was almost certainly familiar with,<sup>24</sup> is powerful as an example of one woman defying the system. Her defiance is complex and the result of her defiance is her death, but the important point of influence here is that she chooses a life based on love and personal choice over a life of reason and fidelity. That such choices are possible for women is a direct consequence of the powers women have under a nation-state. The status of the individual woman as a 'citizen' affords her the power to educate herself and to resist the system of masculine control.

Both novels suggest that under a traditional-state, however, women suffer because they are owned. Certainly Anna does break free from her husband. But her liberation is as much a consequence of his ineptness as a husband-owner as it is of her individual tenacity. In any case, Anna's suicide shows the extent to which her fate is dictated by society; she is held at the fringes because no one wants to own her. The idea of ownership

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<sup>23</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 16

<sup>24</sup> Although *Anna Karenina* was not translated into Chinese until the 1940s, it is not unreasonable to assert that Ba Jin was familiar with the novel in its original Russian or in a French translation. Apart from the incidental quotes from Tolstoy in the main body of *Jia*, Ba Jin's preface to the trilogy is filled with references to Tolstoy's late works.

is thinly veiled as marriage and legitimacy (palatable words for enslavement) and, although Anna initially refuses to divorce Karenin and marry Vronsky, she starts to desire a new husband-owner when life as an un-owned woman becomes unbearable. There is an implicit connection between the parent/child relationship between husband and wife and the ruler/subject relationship between the individual and the state. This is perhaps why the men in the novel absorb themselves with the political questions of the day – they have a stake in the success of the nation, whereas for women the triumph of one idea over the other is as meaningless as it is for a peasant.

Ba Jin, writing against the traditional-state, states directly that women who do not forge their own path will die. In a moment of angst, Qin suggests that women will perish painfully anyway – it is the method of their rebellion that differentiates them. From what must they rebel? From marriage and from family life. Those who live lives prescribed by tradition and follow the political matches men make for them will always be shackled. Those who rebel may die as well but they will die holding on to what makes them human – their choice in the matter.

Before her eyes there suddenly appeared a lengthy highway stretching to infinity, upon which were lain spreading corpses of young women. It became clear to her that this road was built thousands of years ago; the earth on the road was saturated with the blood and tears of those women. They were all tied and handcuffed and driven to this road, and made to kneel there, to soak the earth with their blood and tears, to satiate the sex desire of wild animals with their bodies.<sup>25</sup>

The essential point here is rebellion. What draws women together is not simply a matter of biology; their historical struggle, particularly concerning marriage and ownership of their bodies, is a constant political bond.

This bond attracts unlikely women to each other in a subversive sisterhood. Cousin Mei opens up to Ruijue even though they desire the same man because their

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<sup>25</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 202

predicament as (non)agents in their respective situations is so alike. Similarly, Dolly meets some peasant women in the countryside and begins a conversation with them about children and feeding and husbands. She is comfortable with them because they, although from vastly different social milieus, have similar problems. The peasant women's happiness, their friendship and admiration, resonate with Dolly at a time when the world of men, typified by her husband's tomfoolery, has exiled her to a necessarily frugal life in the countryside. She is scraping by for meals and for the children's clothing. To get her through this period, she finds comfort in the sisterhood of the peasant-women.

The role of the husband as owner is clearly articulated in traditional Chinese society. In traditional China, one could not have two masters. Thus the end of a dynasty signaled the end of a gentleman's political service. The same idea is reflected in husband-wife relationships. The death of Cousin Mei's husband is the 'end of her life' because she cannot serve another man. The bombings and riots are not so much physically threatening as a threat to the position of the Gao family. All the possessions of the family are hidden in the basements to preserve them and the women too, as possessions, are hidden in the garden. With the exception of Qin (who has no owner because she is fatherless and unmarried), political discussion is strictly within the realm of men. In *Jia*, dissent against the traditional system is a matter of youth. The older generation will lose a great deal if things change: they control all access to power and wealth. But the young people (who have yet to serve) stand to lose the least by social and political change.

In both novels, women are regarded as property. In the context of the nation-state, women, as a numerically large and underrepresented demographic, are courted by the new system. The theme of freedom from family life is the individual's parallel to the

nation-state's genesis because all nation-states desire freedom from the 'traditional-state.' However, once the nation-state has been established, nation-states find that freedom is often a mere reorientation of the same interests. An individual choosing to live within the rules of family life or choosing to subvert the rules leaves the nation-state in a predicament. A certain level of subversion is required to build the nation-state and cast off the chains of feudal and traditional-states. But once the nation-state itself becomes an institution, freedom-fighting becomes terrorism. Women are subjected to insincere feelings of gratitude and respect for the nation-state (civility even, perhaps); gratitude and respect find a modern equivalent in the social lubricant of shopping. In a Marcusean process of reverse-desublimation, a woman's thirst for change is quenched by the dangling carrots of a new consumerist culture. The sticks and string that hold that carrot forever out of reach are gratitude toward the nation-state and respect for its every edict. In the two novels, consumer culture does not play the important, public role it does today. However, women are still placated by the emphasis placed on their appearance. In *Anna Karenina*, women are expected to fuss over their toilets. In *Jia*, women are not allowed to cut their hair for the traditional-world sees short hair as a sign of rebellion.

As the nation-state uses gratitude and respect to ensure the obedience of the citizen, the family structure uses these concepts to ensure the obedience of women. To the authors, gratitude and respect, as seen by Anna and Juexin, are emblematic of empty words. Both Tolstoy and Ba Jin are vociferous in their rejection of empty words. In societies pregnant with hollow words, the authors harpoon platitudes in favour of direct speech closer to the speaker's heart. A relationship is sketched between straightforward speech (to give meaning to relationships) and societal harmony based on truth. We see

that when characters speak with ulterior motives, they do not achieve what they set out to achieve or, if they do, that they also produce a false version of social harmony. Juexin tries to persuade the family patriarch to let Juemin marry whom he chooses rather than enter into arranged marriage. He even prepares a speech, rehearsing it “for several nights.”<sup>26</sup> But the patriarch, rather than appreciating the younger man’s delicate tact, is incensed by Juexin’s speech and vows to speed up the marriage preparations for the arranged match. Similarly, Stiva Oblonsky, while ostensibly securing a divorce for his sister, is trying to secure for himself membership in some obscure committee with a sizable salary attached to the post. His speech acquires an ambiguous tone as he tries to both advocate for his sister and fawn over the Countess Ivanovna – a religious fanatic of sorts. He fails in this task because he is unable to speak from the heart. He speaks to flatter the countess when he should plead with reason for Anna’s case or, at the very least, speak frankly of her situation and appeal to the Countess’ Christianity for Anna’s sake.

Anna does not tolerate double-speak. This is perhaps why she is able to leave society and live in the country and abroad – she sees the dull, false conversations and does not wish to partake. All of this becomes much worse when it is gossip about her. Anna can let much of the societal scandal and falseness slip past her because she is concerned with love and happiness and within the medium of love and happiness even the depraved becomes bearable. But she cannot stand the falseness that creeps into Vronsky’s interactions with her. At first it is merely a cold glance. It soon changes into a cold demeanour and finally even his smiles, perhaps Tolstoy’s surest marker of a person’s inner character, turn frosty. There is little love between them and love is what Anna craves most of all. She has given up everything for love and now, as it slips away

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<sup>26</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 269



from her, she begins to crumble. To Vronsky she says: "Respect was invented to fill the empty place where love ought to be! But if you no longer love me, it would be better and more honourable to say so."<sup>27</sup> Anna fears that their love, wild and illicit at first, is going to become genteel and false as Vronsky tries to normalize her social position. This is one of the reasons that Anna initially refuses a divorce, although accepting one would cement her new life. Tolstoy paints Anna sympathetically as one who, although she is not successful, chooses to live outside the falseness of so-called respect. She chooses to live *between* the norms of faithful-wife and second-marriage because she can thus live by her own straightforward rules.

In *Jia*, Juexin does not want Mei to be 'grateful'. Her gratitude makes him feel the impact of his docility in the matter of marriage. Childhood lovers, Mei and Juexin did not marry because Juexin married according to his elders' wishes and did not break with tradition. As Mei lies dead, her mother's apparently soothing words of Mei's gratitude to Juexin for organizing the funeral become unbearable. If Mei were angry with him it would be more bearable for she would be reacting. But now her dead body and supposed 'gratitude' leave Juexin in tears: "...the word 'grateful' was like a needle through Juexin's heart. He didn't know what to say. He wished he could cry. Why should she be grateful to me? He thought. It was I who brought her to this!"<sup>28</sup> As in *Anna Karenina*, 'gratitude' like 'respect' appears to be a substitute for love. Its substitution is encouraged not just between individual relationships but also in the context of the nation-state where each citizen is grateful for his freedom and so does not rebel. But love, as both Anna and

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<sup>27</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 673

<sup>28</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 271

Juexin might agree, has no substitute. Unlike respect and gratitude it is not earned and it cannot be redeemed. Love exists. And when it does not, its absence crushes the soul.

With such a dark painting of women's position in the novels, do the authors believe that family life is inherently tragic for women? While both authors are dissatisfied with the family as they see it, neither is willing to shed the yoke of the family. In fact, living within the rules of the family is portrayed as an individual's ticket to survival. The authors place the choices Dolly and Cousin Mei make in opposition to the choices that Anna and Mingfeng make when faced with questions of whether or not to play by the rules of family life. Dolly and Cousin Mei choose to play by the rules of the family system while Anna and Mingfeng transgress these rules. Their transgression of the rules of family life brings about Anna's and Mingfeng's suicides.

Tolstoy prefaces *Anna Karenina* with the Pauline epigraph: "Vengeance is mine: I will repay."<sup>29</sup> The phrase is both tragic and ambiguous. It is tragic precisely because of the two statements that follow the epigraph, both of which are confirmed as negatives by the power of the biblical epigraph's force of association. We read about happy families all being alike but unhappy families all being distinguished by their unhappiness and immediately plunge *media res*: "Everything was upset in the Oblonsky's house." But what makes the epigraph hang like a mist over the events of the novel is its ambiguous nature. We read it before we hear about Anna, before she betrays her husband, before life becomes unbearable, and before she dies. And so the sense of foreboding, of some sort of villainous act for which vengeance must be sought, spreads like red wine spilled on a tablecloth, the stain of which can never be scrubbed from the characters. Although

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<sup>29</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 1

Tolstoy treats his heroine with much compassion and roundly condemns the shallow society that excludes her and leads to her death, he also pays homage to the moral laws that govern fidelity. George Steiner writes that Tolstoy invokes “the inexorable retributions of moral law.”<sup>30</sup> And this is why Anna must die.

Ba Jin suggests a link between family happiness and happiness in life by painting those without family in strokes of grey and black. Cousin Mei, whose husband has died, is alone. She acutely catalogues the pain of her solitude and starts to see symbols of her unhappiness in nature and poetry. Her male cousins try to cheer her up with calls to forget the past, but Cousin Mei lives in the past for it is the only place where the possibility for happiness exists. She did not, in fact, have a happy married life but in spite of this she longs for the past because married life and family life are, to her, the only two settings upon which the drama of happiness may be performed:

Tomorrow, tomorrow – you all have a tomorrow, but what kind of tomorrow have I? I have only yesterday. The events of yesterday are painful things, but they are all I have to console myself with.<sup>31</sup>

Although family life provides many disappointments, Cousin Mei lacks alternatives to a prescribed family life and so continues to seek happiness in family life. And this is why she must die.

The rules of belonging to a family, often construed as a subset of moral law, are so important that failure to play within these rules sometimes results in death. In the Chinese tradition, the basis for rules was Confucian ideology; in the Russian case, rules about the family were derived from the Orthodox Church and societal mores. And although these rules did not cover every eventuality, people seemed to sense what the

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<sup>30</sup> Steiner, George. “Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism” (New York: Alfred Knopf) pp. 58-71 and 102-105, cited in Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 801

<sup>31</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 123

rules might require in their particular situation. One of the clearest indicators that rules were understood is the way in which Anna and Mingfeng realize that they have broken the rules and the way in which Dolly and Cousin Mei strive to keep within the rule's parameters. By creating parallel character journeys with widely different terminuses, the authors subtly compare the decisions people make and the effect of a character's rebellion or compliance with the accepted rules of belonging to a family. In *Anna Karenina*, Dolly and Anna face a similar situation: they both no longer love the men they married (and, one might suggest, for good cause - Stiva is a womanizer and Karenin is simply dull). In *Jia*, Cousin Mei and Mingfeng are put in the same predicament – that of loving men they cannot, according to society's rules, have.<sup>32</sup>

Dolly is the most poignant example of one who keeps within the prescribed rules. Her husband, Stiva, uses the very last of their money to buy a necklace for his mistress. Meanwhile, his wife and children live with the Levins in the country to save money. The reader rejoices when Dolly finally claims “a right to her own property [refusing] to endorse the contract with a receipt for the last third of the payment.”<sup>33</sup> But the assertive Dolly is clearly an anomaly for she soon acquiesces to her husband's hunger to satisfy his mistresses. Dolly is painfully aware that she is being used, that her children's inheritance will be meager and that their life ahead will be filled with hardship. But, with the exception of the novel's opening scene, she chooses not to confront Oblonsky and to keep within the status quo as a dutiful wife. Interestingly, the opening scene of the novel

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<sup>32</sup> I have chosen to compare the decisions female characters make for two reasons: I wish to make the comparison coherent, matching like situations wherever possible; and I believe that society is far more critical of women who rebel against family rules than men. Koznyshev and Juehui both refuse to fit in to the prescribed molds of family life and yet are left unscathed by the writer's pen. Women in the novels, however, operate on a lower level of agency thus making their decisions all the more susceptible to societal criticism.

<sup>33</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 651

is resolved by Anna's intercession. She comes to Dolly, pleading the case of her husband (and Anna's brother), Stiva. Dolly is won over and forgives her husband his affair with the children's French governess. But Anna herself cannot play within these rules. She pursues love – the most abstract and untamable of emotions – a feeling that the rules of marriage cannot regulate and accordingly disavow. Anna does not enter lightly into this tryst with destiny but carefully weighs her options as she continues to see Vronsky despite her husband's threats of divorce. For Anna, the question of living within the rules of the family (fidelity and service to Karenin) becomes untenable the more she falls in love. Even her love for her son is eclipsed by her desire to follow her heart. And it is this desire to follow her heart that pushes her under the wheels of a moving train.

In *Jia*, Cousin Mei lives entirely within the rules. She is sad but keeps her sadness to herself except when she is forced to reveal her inner thoughts to Ruijue and Juexin. She is in love with Juexin and has loved him since childhood but the discord between their mothers has forced her into a marriage with another man. When this man dies, Cousin Mei is still unable to marry Juexin because he is now married to Ruijue. For her troubles, Cousin Mei dies. But importantly, she dies a natural death. Mingfeng's death is entirely unnatural. She wants to break the most basic of rules about marriage: that is, to marry outside one's social status. The question of how far she will go in her love for Juehui is forced when she hears that she will be given as a concubine to a faceless old man. Distraught and frightened, she decides that she "had to end her young life...her death would bring no loss to the world."<sup>34</sup> It is the act of harboring desire for that which is against the social norm that pushes Mingfeng into the cool, deathly waters of the lake.

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<sup>34</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 217

Death, then, is presented as the only resolution for those who dissent from the rules of the family. Death takes the form of suicide. Thus Anna presents her predicament: there is nothing more for her to see for everything is decided and, moreover, decided unfavorably. Vronsky does not really love her and, worse, merely respects her in the same way he respects his mother. There is a palpable coldness that descends like a shroud over all that Anna touches. She is delirious, she feels sick, and the voices within her begin a soulful and wretched chant. Shunned at the hands of society, Anna has invested everything in her private life. So when the fabric of her private life begins to unravel, she feels that there is 'nothing more to look at' on this earth. Her desolation is so complete that she cannot even comprehend the happiness of others. All of their happiness takes on a base and unreasonable tone; it is as though they mock her through their frivolous laughter:

She heard the second bell ring, and then a moving of luggage, noise, shouting and laughter. It was so clear to Anna that no one had any cause for joy that this laughter jarred on her painfully, and she wished to stop her ears not to hear it.<sup>35</sup>

Anna's desire to build barriers to keep out other people's joy is motivated by her inability to comprehend the possibility of an individual's happiness within the context of her personal sorrow. Strikingly, this is our first introduction to the negative side of Anna's character. Previously, throughout her adultery and near-death in childbirth, Tolstoy portrays her sympathetically, almost as a victim of her own passions. But it is near her death, at precisely the moment when she is least in control of her passions, that the author condemns her. Why is this so? Anna dies because she is a fallen woman. Her decision to leave her husband (although this decision is presented as one of courage initially) inevitably leads her to a path of depravity. It is not so much that she becomes more

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<sup>35</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 693

depraved by new acts of immorality, but rather that the cumulative affect of her immorality descends upon her like a sickness. There is no way, no human way to be precise, of recovering from the brink of suicide once the seeds of discontent and disaffection have been sown.

But is there a spiritual way to draw oneself away from the brink? By juxtaposing Levin's internal turmoil with Anna's, Tolstoy suggests that there is:

And though he was a happy and healthy family man, Levin was several times so near to suicide that he hid a cord lest he should hang himself, and he feared to carry a gun lest he should shoot himself.<sup>36</sup>

Levin is preoccupied with questions of his own peculiar place in the world. He does not engage in society and does not want to engage in society. The idea of committing suicide crosses his mind because the thought of suicide must cross everyone's mind. It is one's duty as a slave of reason to question one's existence. But Levin does not kill himself. Tolstoy presents two reasons for Levin's recovery to sanity: he is not an adulterous being and he has found God.

Like Levin, Anna is not at all concerned with the problems of state. But unlike Levin, her private problems demand sanction that only the state can give. She wishes to divorce her husband and to do so must seek his permission by law. If he withholds his consent, she is both rejected and alone for she permanently loses the right to her son, Serezha. Thus Anna, through the machinations of her well-meaning but thoroughly insensitive brother, Stiva Obolonsky, tries to engineer a divorce and so secure her free position in society. But in the presence of adultery and the absence of God, her rehabilitation into society is impossible. She has knowingly rebelled against the rules of the family as an institution and she must pay the price. The price of eternal solitude with

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<sup>36</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 714

only the expedient Princess Barbara to keep her company is too high a price for Anna to pay. And so Anna snuffs out the candle.

Only one person commits suicide in *Jia*, although many others come close to it in their private melancholy. Mingfeng kills herself because she is promised as a concubine to a Gao family friend. She is in love with Juehui and so the possibility of her sale to the Feng family is a bitter one. The night before her death, she tries to speak to Juehui and solicit his help. But Juehui is too caught up by the demands of editing a newspaper to let her speak. In this vacuum of communication (one that Anna, too, felt acutely before her suicide), Mingfeng decides to preserve her honour in the still waters of the lake. Although the actions of her death are not narrated (in striking contrast to Anna's), her death is not in doubt. Her feelings of aloneness and of death as a resolution are heightened by the autumn night and a feeling of a return to nature. The lake has symbolized much of the joy of the past – when being sold as a concubine did not complicate and sadden her heart – and so the lake appears a logical choice as the venue of her suicide. It also means that, unlike death by fire or knives, Mingfeng's beauty is preserved as a pale, constant reminder to the Gao family of their callousness toward her.

The rules of belonging to a family as a woman are so important that failure to play within these rules sometimes results in death. Death is proposed as the only alternate to women who live outside the prescribed rules of male/female, husband/wife, and ruler/ruled relationships. Death by suicide is presented as a last resort but it is a possibility two characters consider fully before deciding that life lived within the rules of the family is not worth living for. Both Anna and Mingfeng go through phases of solitude and despair before their hopes for the future are rendered so desolate that they cannot



even comprehend the happiness of others. Their inability to function passively within the parameters of the family has broad implications for women (and other groups) within the state, namely the question of what is left to those who dissent from the structure which the nation-state is built upon.

### Part III: The Principled and Happy Life

Women who live by their personal convictions sacrifice their lives. Society condemns them for their transgressions. Both Tolstoy and Ba Jin, however, suggest that life lived according to one's own conviction is a life lived fruitfully. Levin, arguably the character most like Tolstoy, is obsessed with the idea of happiness as the outcome of looking after one's personal happiness. He does not mean personal happiness in a hedonistic or gratuitous way, but in the sense that happiness can be best identified by those who seek it for themselves, rather than through edict or order. Therefore, Levin is a more ardent investor in his personal happiness than he might be in the happiness of others. This forms the mainstay for his arguments against the *Zemstvo*, which he believes is formed under pretence and only gives rise to self-serving nobles who are ignorant of their condition. In *Jia*, Juexin believes he no longer has any hope of attaining happiness because he has bought into the system of family subordination. At the time of their father's death, as the oldest brother he took the role of the head of the generation within the family structure, thereby sacrificing his own happiness. Significantly, Juexin does not present his decision as a choice but as the fated outcome of a series of events. Although he is resigned to a life without freedom, he cautions Juehui not to accept the well-

travelled path. The implication for the state of such a philosophy is problematic. How are the 'imagined communities' of nations to be built if there is no commitment to abstract social-group membership? Can the nation-state rally the people to demonstrations, fund war memorials, and carry out censorship of the press if people act in their own interests? The authors suggest this: if acting in your own interest means that you first pay attention to your own needs and act according to your own philosophy, then you must do so. Their advice is not an invitation to debauchery through selfishness but a call to listen to an inner voice – a safety mechanism against the tyranny of both tradition and modernity.

If life must be lived according to one's own convictions, then why are people penalized for it. How do we explain the boredom Vronsky and Juehui both feel when they are 'imprisoned' because they do as they please? Neither has been imprisoned in concrete and iron to be sure, but both of their imprisonments are very real. Juehui is not allowed to leave the family compound because he has been protesting in the city streets. For a while the imprisonment does not tax him: he reads and thinks about the philosophy he reads; friends visit to keep him updated on the political events in the city; he whiles away the afternoons playing chess with his sister-in-law. But the boredom of his physical imprisonment is finally too much for him to bear. He writes in his diary:

When I awoke it was already dark, and I felt cold. The faint glow of the sixteen-watt electric bulb in my room did nothing to warm my heart. Again I was oppressed with the dullness of my family life. Pacing the floor, I thought of the many exciting things going on outside. I can't stand this kind of life any more. There is nothing but oppression for me here in this house.<sup>37</sup>

Just as Juehui, a modern man in a traditional-state, is only bound to the traditional-state by the accident of his birth into the Gao family, so too Vronsky sees his position in a quasi-family with his lover as a temporary one in *Anna Karenina*. Juehui and Vronsky

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<sup>37</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 88

entertain ideas about the family being “dull” and life on the outside being “exciting” because they see themselves as only temporary residents in the family. They fiercely maintain the reality of their imprisonment (until the end of both novels) because it is precisely this imprisonment within the family that defines their present life and motivates their future desires.

Vronsky is effectively imprisoned by Anna’s non-existent position in society. Their position in the country, although initially very satisfactory with his massive wealth and new provincial appointments, becomes enslavement. He is not free to do as he pleases, especially if what pleases him is to be a society dandy. Hobbies, such as building an area hospital and his escapade into painting, temporarily stave off his craving for freedom. But ultimately it is Anna’s perception of this craving for freedom that leads to the effective dysfunction of their union:

She felt that side by side with the love that united them there had grown up some evil sort of strife, which she could not cast out of his heart and still less out of her own.<sup>38</sup>

Vronsky’s quest for freedom in the area of feeling and love is roundly criticized, not just by Anna, but by the events that follow from his selfish desire. His set (and Vasya Veslovsky, the promiscuous fop, must be included in this set) is enamoured by the idea of freedom from anything that may hold them down. He represents the new liberal views, representative of the nation-state, where it is possible to freely change one’s relationship to marriage. M. S. Gromenka writes that, according to Tolstoy’s view, in marriage, “unconditional freedom does not exist; laws exist there.”<sup>39</sup> It is simply not possible to challenge the spirit of marriage with abstractions about freedom, to break apart a nuclear family without bringing about the unhappiness of its members, nor is it possible to

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<sup>38</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 639

<sup>39</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, Maude translation, ed. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 768

construct a new happiness upon this old unhappiness. In *Jia*, Ba Jin maintains that it is possible to construct a new family happiness from the ashes of the destroyed traditional family. The new family will grow, he suggests, and will function well precisely because it will learn from the negative example of the old, traditional Confucian family system.

Where does boredom with family life arise from and what is it a symptom of? The answer lies within one's perceived relations to the people around oneself. Both Juehui and Vronsky are tormented in their boredom not because they have chosen to act on their passions but because they still seek the affirmation of society. Their social rebellions, in other words, are not complete. Vronsky loves Anna and moves away with her but still seeks the love and affection of his mother who opposes Anna. Juehui initially locks himself in his room but still holds out hope that his grandfather's opinions will change. The ties that bind an individual to a family are much more complex than ideology. Likewise, the ties that bind an individual to the geographic-, political-, and cultural-state are strong. It is only when one mentally breaks free from seeking affirmation from one's family that one begins to live. Juehui and Vronsky only begin to live lives unencumbered by the expectations of others at the end of the novels. It takes Anna's and Mingfeng's suicides to bring about this change in their character.

People feel bound to the family even in their rebellion against the family (their rebellion causes them to be ostracized) because that which is natural has been violated. The family enters the debate about nation-states and the individual because it is the crossroads where nature and society meet. Individuals are socialized by entering into the contract of marriage and, by extension, also sign up to participate in the institution of the family. Tolstoy was against the artificial constructions of society that separated man from

his own nature and from the land. Like his Levin in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy is reluctant to embrace the corruptions of organization. The Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, wrote that mankind manufactures complications, which destroy the simplicity of the natural universe, the Tao. Derk Bodde writes that “the link between the two is found in Tolstoy’s *Letter to a Chinese*, in which, though without specifically mentioning Lao Tzu, he appeals directly to the Chinese *Tao* as support for his own anarchistic ideas.”<sup>40</sup> In *Jia*, Ba Jin, too, believes that organization corrupts. The functioning, liberal newspaper works so well because it operates spontaneously. Leadership is shared and the group comes together because they share similar interests. The Gao family, by contrast, is grouped by the accident of birth. The Jue brothers rebel against the family because they hold such different political views and, as such, constitute an *unnatural* element of the Gao family.

Ba Jin prefaces the trilogy Turbulent Stream with his initial thoughts about Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*. The dark work, he says, prompted him to write the words, “Life is in itself a tragedy” in the margins of the manuscript. But Ba Jin is quick to retract this bitter view of life. In fact, a large part of his preface is devoted to recanting his initial statement about *Resurrection*, Tolstoy’s other works, and literature at large. Drawing inspiration from Romain Rolland’s idea of *la vie comme un jeu*, Ba Jin states his optimism in life that is never destitute of hope:

The life current moves on all the time, without a moment’s rest, because it is unstoppable; nothing can check it. Along its course, it shoots forth a variety of sprays...all these congregate into the main stream of the life current, moving on with a tremendous force that can wipe out mountains, heading towards a definite sea or ocean.<sup>41</sup>

The statement is full of zest for life, a life that although patently full of contradictions, prejudices, and inequalities, is nevertheless full of great promise. In many respects, Ba

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<sup>40</sup> Bodde, Derk. *Tolstoy and China*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1950, pg. 81

<sup>41</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 1

Jin's enthusiasm reflects some Russian futurists' explanation of life in terms of powerful machinery. In this case, life is a river that cuts a path so powerful that it can even destroy mountains. In fact, Ba Jin's choice in referring to *Resurrection* (in which an idle prince, realizing he is the indirect cause of a young woman's wrongful conviction, vows to reform himself) is no accident. Ba Jin does have (perhaps unlike some futurists) an explicit didactic agenda. Although the author writes the second part of the preface as an apologia of his youthful musings, the novel itself brims with authorial comment about families, the search for happiness, and life itself.

In 1926, Yevgeny Zamyatin published an article in the journal "The Goal" that linked Tolstoy and Rolland in much the same way as Ba Jin does. He speaks of the role of the writer to lead readers in a positive, forward direction, rather than to act as the mouthpiece of the state or of traditional society:

What matters is that his [the writer's] work be sincere, that it lead the reader forward...that it disturb the reader rather than reassure and lull his mind...But where forward? And how far forward? Reduction of prices, better sanitation in the cities...all this is very good I can imagine an excellent newspaper article on these topics (an article that will be forgotten the next day). But I find it difficult to imagine a work of Lev Tolstoy or Romain Rolland based on improvement of sanitation (xi).

Nation-states tend toward sponsoring palatable fiction, preferably heroic in nature. But neither of these novels is imbued with creating false utopias. Although *Jia* and *Anna Karenina* can hardly be called bright, there are undeniable highlights of optimism in their idealised visions of the family.

#### Part IV: Two Banks of the Same River

The dichotomies implicitly presented here (ie: traditional-state/nation-state) are not absolute dichotomies. Absolute dichotomies tend to reduce one to the other's

negative mirror image and thus do not acknowledge the inherent inner relationship.<sup>42</sup> We cannot rely solely on dichotomies to explore a work because there is a certain beauty in viewing literature through a non-dichotomous prism. The hypothetical red/non-red dichotomy, for example, is misleading not because it pits all other colours (and non-colours) against red but because it fails to clarify the plurality of shades that may constitute our understanding of red: cerise, crimson, carmine, vermillion, scarlet, maroon, plum, garnet, the list goes on. Both writers refute the Enlightenment positivist philosophy of eternal, timeless truths in all spheres of life that can only be discovered by reason. To use Isaiah Berlin's terminology, Tolstoy and Ba Jin are foxes fighting the ideology of hedgehogs.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, although Ba Jin is a natural fox, he exhibits tendencies toward "hedgehogism"; in his writings, he tenaciously maintains anarchism as a panacea for China's condition.

Part of the reason that it is so difficult to rely on dichotomies is that the dichotomy's historic creation is often the source of contention. Writers are able to construct the straw men against whom the other end of the binary fits perfectly; they are able to engineer the production of the required history and then to create its balancing half. Monika Greenleaf and Stephen Moeller-Sally suggest that nation-states in the nineteenth-century create narratives to support their formation:

By this time it was a *sine qua non* for any European state to legitimate its existence historically. The most powerful narrative for an elite to gain control of was, therefore, the

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<sup>42</sup> Zhang, Longxi, *Mighty Opposites : From dichotomies to differences in the comparative study of China* Stanford University Press: Stanford, Calif., 1998, p. 56

<sup>43</sup> In an essay on Tolstoy, Isaiah Berlin wrote that writers can be classified as either foxes or hedgehogs. The foxes realize that the world is filled with complexity and seek to explore questions rather than give answers. Hedgehogs believe in eternal truths. Chekhov, for example, is a fox, while Dostoevsky might be called a hedgehog.

nation's history. Needless, to say, quite different versions could be told, not only in fiction, but in historiography itself.<sup>44</sup>

With the concept of Moscow as the Third Rome, Russia creates the narrative of a divine series originating in Rome and invested with the mystique of carrying on true Christianity. The Golden Age of Russian literature is, in a sense, “made to be revived...[it was] transformed into an emblem of mourning: along with its defining personalities, characteristic ideologies, and institutional formations, its spirit seemed irretrievably lost.”<sup>45</sup> Etienne Balibar furthers this idea of a ‘narrative of nation’ being created to strengthen the legitimacy of the nation-state – a form that has no precedent and so must fabricate its own history.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from literary blurring and rewriting history as a project, dichotomies are further complicated by the concept of literary influence. Literary influence runs the gamut from “incidence to causality”<sup>47</sup> but here I will explore only very briefly the influences on Tolstoy of the Chinese sphere and similarly the influences of the Russian sphere on Ba Jin. If one were to classify these influences, Tolstoy's main influences came from Chinese philosophy, while Ba Jin's came from Russian literature. I view these influences as neither incidental nor causal; they are presented here in different contexts, each of which will be clarified as the need arises.

Tolstoy believed in non-violence, deriving his beliefs from the Sermon on the Mount where Christians were encouraged to ‘turn the other cheek’. Since governments

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<sup>44</sup> Greenleaf, Monika & Moeller-Sally, Stephen. *Russian Subjects: Empire, Nation, and the Culture of the Golden Age*. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, pg. 11

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 1

<sup>46</sup> Balibar writes: “The history of nations...is always already presented to us in the form of a narrative which attributes to these entities the continuity of a subject. The formation of a nation thus appears as the fulfillment of a ‘project’ stretching over centuries, in which there are different stages and moments of coming to self-awareness, which the prejudices of the various historians will portray as more or less decisive...”

<sup>47</sup> Hassan, Ihab. “The Problem of Influence in Literary History” in Primeau, Ronald. *Influx: Essays on Literary Influence*. National University Publications: London, 1977, pg. 34



annex territories and maintain control through violence (or the threat thereof), Tolstoy gradually formed his own ideology of Christian anarchism.<sup>48</sup> Many of his thoughts reflect the teachings of Lao Tzu and other Chinese philosophers. His library at Yasnaya Polyana contained no fewer than fifty-four texts of Chinese philosophy and culture.<sup>49</sup> In letters, Tolstoy often wrote that Lao Tzu was his 'favourite' Chinese philosopher. In terms of his theories of the state, Tolstoy was against the artificial constructions of society that separated man from the land. Like his Levin in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy is reluctant to embrace the corruptions of organization. Lao Tzu wrote that mankind manufactures complications, which destroy the simplicity of the natural universe, the Tao. Derk Bodde writes that "the link between the two is found in Tolstoy's *Letter to a Chinese*, in which, though without specifically mentioning Lao Tzu, he appeals directly to the Chinese *Tao* as support for his own anarchistic ideas."<sup>50</sup>

Ba Jin derives his anarchistic ideas from Bakunin and Kropotkin. However, he is influenced a great deal by the writings of Turgenev and Tolstoy, to whom he paid homage by liberally quoting their work in his own. In the wake of the 1917 revolution in Russia, Ba Jin sensed that China was undergoing much of what Russia had undergone prior to revolution and so looked to Russian writers who had galvanized public sentiment in the last decades of the monarchy. The social conditions that existed in China in the 1920s and 1930s were antithetical to the conditions contemporary thinkers thought were required to foment revolution. There was a large illiterate peasantry, a minute sliver of

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<sup>48</sup> Christian anarchism as it relates to the individual perfecting himself without the structure of society and marriage, and in sexual abstinence in order to be closer to God is explored under the heading 'Influences' in the second chapter.

<sup>49</sup> Birukoff, Paul. *Tolstoi und der Orient, Briefe und sonstige Zeugnisse uber Tolstois Beziehungen zu den Vertretern orientalischer Religionen*, Rotapfel-Verlag: Zurich & Leipzig, 1925, cited in Bodde, Derk. *Tolstoy and China*. Princeton University Press, 1950. pg.11

<sup>50</sup> Bodde, Derk. *Tolstoy and China*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1950, pg. 81

landowners, and a deeply divided intelligentsia. And yet, some sort of revolution was in the air.<sup>51</sup> What galvanized public opinion and channeled it? Ba Jin believed that as the forces of nationalism gathered in the sky and all around him, leadership fell (as in the Russian case) upon writers to create understanding about the forces that surrounded people. Integral to this aim was the writing of a 'family novel' – a novel that considers the complexity of relationships that were forged under different times and that now struggle to redefine themselves. In this sense, then, Ba Jin returns to the traditional role of the writer as a shepherd-guide.

Recognising the limitations of the dichotomy between traditional- and modern-states, the two authors respond by choosing a middle path. Rather than a prosaic, expected elegy to individualism, the two novels paint the dichotomy of individual/family in all its complexity. Man's dilemma is not simply a choice of one over the other (Juehui, after all, leaves his family with some regret; Koznyshev continues his bachelor life only because he is too emotionally weak to share his love with another) but a complex decision that each individual, influenced by both 'sides', must make. The motif of sailing down the river is an oft-used image of the *between-ness* that is the site of the individual's journey. Ba Jin calls his trilogy Turbulent Stream and, in other novels, Tolstoy situates important incidents on a river (the conversation between Andrei Bolkonsky and Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace* comes to mind.)<sup>52</sup> The river is the site of one's journey, the

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<sup>51</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso: New York, 1991, pg. 44-45

<sup>52</sup> *Anna Karenina* does not contain an example of a pivotal event unfolding on a river. However, Anna does end her life on the industrial equivalent of the river – the railroad. In this sense, transport and movement as metaphors for the individual's path through life continue, albeit in newly construed terms.

place where one can view the left and the right banks, the traditional and the modern worlds, both the life of ensconced family happiness and the world of individual freedom.

The construction of the left bank is filled with the happiness of family life. It is portrayed as natural and, in the absence of depravity, is the supposed choice of all humans. Family life is not simply a bow to past traditions but it is the desire of every individual to socialize with a mate and progeny. But family life is rarely happy. The institution of the family, like the institution of the nation-state, constantly demands more from its members. Left unchecked, it washes away the spontaneity of individuals. It is a dictated and forced love, built upon the blood and bones of the unwilling. The pursuit of family happiness is as much a fulfillment of duty as it is the pursuit of any lofty goal.

The construction of the right bank is awash with sonnets to the individual. The individual knows and loves because he feels. The individual makes choices dependent on his own desires, thereby unshackling himself from servitude to the family. The individual chooses love and this love, in many cases, is true love. But the right bank is not perfect. The right bank also represents the imbecility of personal love, of momentary love that is retracted in an instant over trifles. Love is easily forgotten, subsumed when necessary. This love may be passionate, but its passion is often the surest indicator of its fleeting nature. If we suspect that we are about to lose this kind of love we may lightly say, "I'll love you always" or hum to the tune of a love song. We might use words like 'respect' and 'grateful' without meaning a thing. Our word-bound imagination failing us, we may resort to temporary tears as Juehui does over Mingfeng's suicide. We may drop a passionate yearning for a mate for the untimely story of truffles as Koznyshev manages to

do because the 'time just isn't right'. Individual love, love chosen without coercion, ostensibly 'true' love, is also corruptible, false, and sometimes unnatural.

But life itself is not situated on either bank of the proverbial river. Life is the water in the middle and the banks are separated by the very entity that gives them meaning. Ba Jin alludes to life on the water by leaving the main character on the water at the end of the novel. His trilogy, essentially about the challenges of different facets of life, is called Turbulent Stream. Tolstoy suggests the idea of the river through the actions of his characters. Those who tether their boat to either bank suffer greatly; those who look at both banks and yet sail down the river are the ones who survive. The authors' matching of a river with the path of life is significant because a river is a living and constantly changing entity. The authors' message is, thus, both a caution and a word of optimism. They caution against situating oneself on either bank of the river but show their optimism for a life lived in the liminal space between.

But the novels cannot be read as simply optimistic. The fate of children is a dark aspect in both. Children seem to be parents' last throw of the dice in the losing game with time. In both novels, a violent childbirth (Anna's daughter and Ruijue's son) leads to the child becoming an enemy and a symbol of all that has not been fulfilled. In *Jia*, the announcement of Ruijue's death drives a wedge between Juexin and his new son. He cannot love the baby because he has failed to be a strong father and has allowed his extended family to trample all over the baby's mother. His frustration at his own impotence finds expression in his hate toward the child: "He had none of the father's love for his infant. The child was his enemy, an enemy who had stolen Ruijue's life."<sup>53</sup> In *Anna Karenina*, Anna's daughter is born into a family filled with passion but with no

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<sup>53</sup> Ba Jin. *Jia*. trans. Sidney Shapiro. Doubleday: Chicago, 1972. pg. 309

love. Anna's son, Serezha, is negatively affected by Stiva Oblonsky's visit; infidelity's effect on children becomes apparent:

...he guessed they had been talking about his mother. And in order not to blame the father with whom he lived and upon whom he depended, and above all not to give way to the sensibility which he considered so degrading, Serezha tried not to look at that uncle, who had come to upset his peace of mind, and not to think of what was called to mind by the sight of him.<sup>54</sup>

Serezha's is the story of children who are caught in the midst of intra-family feuding.

Their stories only come to public attention, as in the novels, through the cracks of adult squabbles.

The complexity of the messages in the novels reflects the complexity of life. Both writers delight in the complexity of things. The novels are not neatly sewn up and the futures of Levin in the countryside and of Juehui in the city are not sketched. The authors may suggest that not knowing the key to a riddle is cruel, but it is perhaps even crueler to have to tell yourself there is no key because there is no longer any riddle. In prose both endowed with allusion and topical in focus, they affirm that there will always be a riddle as long as there are boats. And as long as water flows, the key will *not* be in our hands.

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<sup>54</sup> Tolstoy, Lev. *Anna Karenina*, trans. George Gibian. Norton: New York, 1995, pg. 658

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