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Wang Meng's 'Hard Thin Gruel'

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Text of 'Hard Thin Gruel'

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[Story by Wang Meng (3769 5536), "Hard Thin Gruel" (Jianning de Xizhou 1017 4289 4104 4449 4728); originally published in ZHONGGUO ZUOJIA (CHINESE WRITERS) No 2, 1989]

[Text] The formal members of our family include Grandfather, Grandmother, Father, Mother, Uncle, Aunt (uncle's wife), me, my wife, Cousin, Cousin's husband, and my very loveable beanpole of a son. Their ages are, respectively, 88, 84, 63, 64, 61, 57, 40, 40 ... and 16. The stepped structure of the ages is almost ideal. Besides these, there is a non-formal member of the family who is even more a formal member of the family than the formal members, and without whom we could not do, and that is Sister Xu. She is 59 years old and has been managing our household affairs now for 40 years; she will not leave us and we cannot leave her. Besides, she is "Sister" to our whole family, from Grandfather to my son, and for Sister Xu there are inborn human rights and a natural equality. Everyone calls her "Sister."

Our life has always been very peaceful and settled. On all such questions such as "Do you think this summer is going to be extremely hot?" "For the tea, should we buy Dragon Well Tea at eight yuan a box or the green tea at forty cents a box?" "For the soap, should we get the White Orchid brand, the Violet brand or the Gold Shield brand?" everyone always deferred to Grandfather. There was never ever a difference of opinion, we never had demonstrative contention and unyielding arguments, we never had maneuvering among cliques or open or hidden struggles. All of us even favored the same hair style, though with male and female differences of course.

For the past several decades we rose each morning at 6:10; at 6:35 Sister Xu had breakfast prepared for us: sliced and toasted mantou, rice gruel, pickled turnips. At 7:10, each person leaves for work or for school. After Grandfather retired, at this time he would also leave the house to do his duties with the street committee. At 12:00 noon, we would return for some fried noodles in bean sauce prepared by Sister Xu. After a short rest, at 1:30 we would each again set out for work or school. Grandfather would have his afternoon nap until 3:30, rise, wash up, gargle and rinse his mouth, sit in his easy-chair drinking his tea and reading the paper. At about five o'clock, Grandfather, Grandmother and Sister Xu would discuss that evening's meal. This discussion was a daily matter of deliberation, and for not only Grandfather and Grandmother, but also Sister Xu it was a topic of zestful interest. However, the decisions arrived at for the most part did not differ much from day to day: This evening now, why don't we have rice? What about the main dish? How about one meat and one dish half meat and half vegetables? Make it two vegetables. What about soup? No, no need for soup then tonight.

Make it a single-course meal. Deliberations completed, Sister Xu would go into the kitchen and after rattling and banging pots for some thirty minutes she would inevitably then reappear and ask Grandfather and Grandmother: "I must be really mixed up today, I forgot to ask either of you: That dish half meat and half vegetables—do you want the meat sliced or shredded?" Now this was definitely a major question. Grandfather and Grandmother would look each other in the eye, an expression would be exchanged and then one would say: "Make it sliced meat." Or they would say "Shredded." And thereupon all intentions were totally carried through satisfactorily.

Everyone was satisfied. First of all, Grandfather was satisfied. Grandfather had suffered a great deal as a child. He often told us: "Eating your fill at every meal, wearing all your clothes without patches, having everything you need in the house, and then being surrounded by your sons and grandsons, and being in good health: this is the type of life that in the past not even the rich landlords would dare dream of. And you, you shouldn't be so damn presumptuous! Which one of you knows the taste of real hunger?" And then Father and Mother and Uncle and Aunt would all exclaim that they had not forgotten the taste of real hunger. When you get hungry, your chest and stomach get tighter and tighter, you can't hold your head up, and the calves of your legs get real heavy—from what they say real hunger is a lot like over-eating—you keep wanting to vomit. Our whole family, and especially Grandfather and Grandmother, all espoused and earnestly practiced the philosophy of contentment in the small joys of life and were true and faithful supporters of the present day system.

Sudden changes took place in the past several years. New fads and new ways of doing things flooded in. Within a few short years our house suddenly had a color TV, a refrigerator, and a washing machine. And my son's talk was frequently studded with English words. Now Grandfather was quite enlightened and open to new things. From the newspapers he read every afternoon after his nap and from the radio and TV broadcasts he listened to after dinner he took in new concepts and new vocabulary. He frequently solicited the family's suggestions: "Do you think there is anything about the family or our life that should be reformed or improved?"

Everybody said no. Sister Xu went so far as to say that she only hoped that this kind of life could be passed on to future generations, that every day would be like this, that each year were like this, that each generation, generation after generation, would only be like this. My son eventually did make a suggestion, but before making it screwed up his eyes tightly for a long time, and it looked like woolly caterpillars had crawled onto his eyes. His suggestion: buy a radio-cassette recorder. Grandfather, always ready to accept good ideas, gave his permission. Thus, a Red Light brand stereo radio cassette recorder was added to the household. When it was brand new, it was very entertaining: you would make a speech, he would sing a song, you would make sounds like a cat,

she would read a bit from the paper and it would be recorded and then we would play it back, and you and the whole family would enjoy it and laugh and applaud, and everyone said the radio-recorder was a good thing. To think that our great grandparents and ancestors never knew what a recorder was was enough to make us sigh. Two days later the novelty wore off. A few cassettes were purchased, but our singing was not nearly as good as what came over the radio or the TV. And soon the radio-recorder was set to one side and began to gather dust. Everyone came to realize that new technologies and new machines were really of limited usefulness, and were nowhere nearly as important as harmony and order in the family. They were not nearly as durable as the old traditions—the old “gramophone” was still best.

The year it was decided to eliminate the afternoon nap—the afternoon rest period of 40 minutes to an hour—really caused an upset in the whole family. First they said that each work unit would supply free noon lunches, which made us both happy and concerned. Happy that we would get free meals, concerned that it was a break in our habits. Sure enough, we ate them for two days and everyone was complaining of indigestion and no one was able to take a shit. It wasn't many days before they announced that the free noon meals were canceled, which caused some confusion. What were we to do now? Grandfather had taught us that in everything we should set the example and follow the path indicated by the government. So we bought lunch boxes and started carrying our lunches, and it was a great to-do for a while. Sister Xu was so upset she lost sleep over it, her teeth ached, she developed a sty in one eye and cardiac arrhythmia. Not long after, the various organs voluntarily extended the noon rest period. Some, while not officially ordering an extension, just automatically set back the time for returning to work, without setting back quitting time. Our family restored the noon meal of fried noodles in bean sauce. Sister Xu's eyes lost their inflammation and her teeth stopped aching, her sleeping and waking times returned to normal and her heart regained its normal rate of 70-80 beats per minute.

A new day brings a new breeze, a new tide rises each morning, all things seek a life of self-contentment, but the true path of human existence is full of vicissitudes. In these times when we are beset from all sides with calls to make self examinations, to recall past griefs and despise old things, when everyone wants us to cherish the dream of reform and modernization, it seems as if even the dearest friends and closest companions we have established as our role models, our exemplars, are urging us to change and move on, and if it isn't from Guangzhou, then definitely from Hong Kong or even in America appear our new fads to imitate. Thus it was that Grandfather suggested that we change from the patriarchal autocracy to the cabinet system of government, for which he had a name: the full family plenum (which included Sister Xu, as a non-voting delegate with the right to speak). If his idea was approved, the full members would serve as chairman on a rotating basis. With

the exception of Sister Xu, all agreed to this. And so Father was asked to first chair the family government, and the resolution was passed that he would implement meal reforms.

All of his life my father had eaten ready-made meals and performed ready-made work (i.e. work assigned to him). Now to be responsible for directing the major task of cooking the meals was for him both embarrassing and extremely difficult. When major questions arose, such as which kind of tea to buy, whether to prepare soup or not, or whether the meat should be sliced or shredded, he inevitably went to ask Grandfather. No matter what he said or what he did, it was always under Grandfather's banner. “Grandfather said to buy Chrysanthemum brand insect repellent mosquito incense sticks.” “Grandfather said that tonight we will not have soup.” “Grandfather says not to use that detergent in washing dishes, those chemical kinds probably have all sorts of poisons in them. Use warm water and washing soda: it is cheaper and cleaner.”

Doing things this way only complicated matters. When Sister Xu had a question, she asked Father; Father would not make the decision, but would go and ask Grandfather and come back and relay the message to Sister Xu prefacing it with “Grandfather says.” It would have been easier to just go ask Grandfather directly. Ah, but to go and directly ask Grandfather, one feared Father feeling affronted and Grandfather's resentment. Grandfather's resentment would be real: He told Father several times: “You make these decisions. Don't come and ask me any more.” And thereupon Father said to Sister Xu: “Grandfather said that I should make the decisions. Grandfather said I should not ask him any more.”

Uncle and Aunt were whispering furtively to themselves. What they said, I do not know. However, quite possibly it was that they were dissatisfied with Father's inabilities and they suspected Father of putting on a front, falsely relaying orders from on high. They were also dissatisfied with the fact that Father did not ease up on his control, and in the same way, were dissatisfied with Sister Xu's longwindedness, or even dissatisfied with the fact that the family ever agreed to this cabinet system and passed on this cabinet election of Father in this way.

Grandfather got wind of some of this and tried to straighten Father out one time, explaining that delegation of authority was the trend of the times. There was nothing Father could do; he agreed not to constantly do everything in Grandfather's name. Father also did delegate some authority: he made it clear that the authority to decide whether or not to make soup and whether to slice or shred the meat was now entirely Sister Xu's.

Sister Xu refused. How can I make those decisions? She made her refusal with flowing tears, and was so upset that she missed a meal. However, everyone in the family urged her on. “You've been in our family all these years, you should have capability and you should have the

authority! Take it on! We will support you! Buy whatever you want to buy! Cook whatever you want to cook! We'll eat whatever you make. We trust you!"

Sister Xu eventually stopped crying and smiled, thanking everyone for giving her this promotion. Everything went back to the way it was, but actually everyone gradually began to nit-pick. Everyone was well aware that this meal was prepared by Sister Xu alone, it was not done with the approval of the highest authorities as the precedent and basis, and what started out as subconscious lack of respect began to change into conscious dissatisfaction. The first to speak was my son, then it was Cousin and her husband, and finally it was my wife and myself. At first we cast a few sarcastic remarks. "Our meals have not changed in 40 years, soon they will be artifacts!" "Sticking to the old ways, staying in the rut, solidified and ossified, no desire for making progress!" "Our family is falling behind the models for the age!" "Sister Xu's limitations are too great, her cultural level is too low! She is a good person, but her attainments are too low. Who would imagine that in the eighties we would be living at Sister Xu's level?"

Sister Xu was blissfully unaware; on the contrary, she began to exhibit some symptoms of smug complacency. She began to carry out several reforms according to her own ideas. The first was that she changed the two servings of turnips on two plates to one serving of turnips on two plates. Then the salted vegetables with sesame oil became vegetables without sesame oil; the small dish of diced oil-fried meat in the noon meal's fried noodles became water-poached meat, the soup on an average of once every two days became soup once a week, the egg-drop soup became the lowest grade of "broth" made of just soy sauce and chopped green onions. She used the food money she saved to buy some ginseng royal jelly and delivered it to Grandfather's room. We tightened our belts in loyalty to Grandfather, and though we dared to rage, we dared not speak. The most despicable thing was, as my son reported it, after she made our broth, she first saved out a bowl of the freshest, most fragrant liquid containing the most chopped onions for herself, and enjoyed it before the rest of us were served. On another occasion, while she was in the kitchen preparing food she was also cracking melon seeds between her teeth, certainly, my son said, she was embezzling the food money. "Power corrupts, partial power corrupts partially, absolute power corrupts absolutely." My son spoke plausibly and at length on his new concepts.

No one below the rank of Father said anything. Having gotten this type of covert inspiration, he grasped the occasion of Sister Xu's again drinking her broth first and launched a vicious attack: "That's enough of your low level cooking! You again picked out the onions for yourself! From tomorrow onward I am taking over and I will have everyone enjoying the modernized life!"

Although Sister Xu cried and put up a fuss, the masses said nothing. Everyone thought we might as well let my

son take over. He was young, he had energy, he was inventive, he had obvious talents, he met the standard for adulthood. Naturally, we, and this included me, tried in many ways to comfort Sister Xu: "You have been cooking for our family for 40 years, and it is the achievements that count, no one can take that away from you."

My son expounded his theories at great and rousing length. "This family has been eating the same meals for 40 years. This is not only devoid of novelty, but has a fundamental drawback and that is it contains too many carbohydrates and not enough protein. A lack of protein can adversely affect your growth and development, and block the regeneration and vitality of your white blood cell antibodies. The result is that the people of our country have frail physiques and are in poor physical condition. In all of the developed nations the average individual daily intake of protein is more than seven times our national average daily consumption, and of this, their intake of animal protein is more than 14 times our average. As this situation persists, our bodies are not as tall as theirs, we are not as well formed as they are, we do not have their strength and do not have their spiritual fortitude. A person should sleep for one period a day, four or five or at the most six hours of sleep is enough. From dawn to dusk you will have more than enough energy and vitality and spirit. And what do we do? We not only sleep in the afternoon, but we are always listless. Maybe you will say that we should not compare ourselves with the developed nations. In that case, I will tell you this: the Han race's nutritional composition does not even compare well with that of our minority nationalities in the North—and you cannot say that the minority nationalities' level of economic development is higher than ours! Our total protein intake cannot hold a candle to that of the Mongols, the Uygurs, the Kazakhs, the Koreans, or even the Tibetans in the southwest. This sort of nutritional composition—how can we allow it to remain unchanged? Take our breakfasts for example: every morning we eat sliced mantou, gruel, and pickled vegetables....good Heavens! Is this any breakfast for a twentieth century 1980's Chinese major city upper income modern person to eat? It is frightening! It's totally stupid! Thin gruel and pickled vegetables are the hallmark of the Sick Man of the East! This is just a slow suicide! This is ignorance! This is the humiliation of the descendants of the Emperors Yan Di and Huang Di! This is the root cause of the decline of the Cathay civilization! This is a sure sign of the decline of the Yellow River civilization! If down through history we had not been eating gruel and pickled vegetables for breakfast and instead had been eating butter and toast, would England been able to defeat us in the 1840 Opium War? Would Empress Zixi have had to flee to Chengde in 1900 before the Eight Power Allied Forces? Would the Japanese have dared to instigate the September First Incident in 1931? In 1937 would the little bastards have dared to incite the Marco Polo Bridge incident? If the Japanese army had invaded, taken a look, and seen that each and every Chinese had butter and cream on his

lips—why whole divisions, whole regiments would be totally stupefied with shock! If after 1949 our leaders had early on made the decision to eliminate gruel and pickled vegetables, and had the entire nation eating butter and toast and a side order of ham and sausages and eggs and yogurt and cheese and a side of jelly and honey and chocolate, how could our national strength, our science, our technology, our arts, our sports, our housing, our education, our per capita car ownership average not have achieved world advanced levels at an early date? In the end, thin gruel and pickled vegetables are the source of our misfortunes! It is the reason for the extreme stability of the feudal society and the lack of development and progress! We have to totally eliminate thin gruel and pickled vegetables! If gruel and pickled vegetables do not go, all hope for China is lost!"

The speaker was passionate about his subject; the listeners were visibly moved. I, on the one hand, was alarmed, and on the other hand was glad. The pleasant surprise was that without my being aware of it, my son not only was no longer wearing split-bottom pants and calling on me to wipe his butt for him, but he had accumulated so much learning, had newly adapted such great concepts, had put forward such trenchant ideas, and had firmly grasped such critical vital points: why, if Heaven did have feelings, well Heaven would grow old also: the true path for humanity was the strengthening of its children! Really, they were raised on thin gruel and pickled vegetables, but they have ambitions for butter and ham, they swallow the all-encompassing storms of modernization and spit out clouds enough to envelope the four-dimensional space of the entire world; truly the younger generation will surpass the elder; the world in the fundamental final analysis is really theirs. What frightened me was the fact that the moment he wet his lips and opened his mouth, the kid went into a flailing attack on the old long-standing abuses and the new contemporary abuses as if they could be utterly done away with, like he was some emperor wielding imperial power, completely overstating the facts, making grandiose but totally impractical plans, misleading the family with his simplistic chatter, and ending up with nothing practical. According to the experience I have accumulated over the last half century, whoever describes a truly serious large problem as being as easy as mixing onions in tofu, as both clearly understood and self-evident, that capturing the head of the enemy general from the middle of his massed troops would be as easy as pulling it out of your pocket, would be easier than turning one's hand over, sooner or later, after the first excitement has died down, you find he has contracted a good case of impotence. Now this big earful my son had spouted, as far as being a plan for the generations, was the depths of impotency.

Anyway, with a soft nasal snort, Cousin muttered: "Easy enough to say! Seems to me that if we had all that bread and butter, the whole modernization would be completed already."

"What!?" My son was at his peak just then, and shouted: "Good God! In the sixties Nikita Khrushchev advocated goulash communism. In the eighties our Aunt wants to start bread and butter modernization! What a striking similarity! Modernization implies the automation of industry the intensification of agriculture the superiorization of science the synthesization of national defense the discretionalization of thinking the agglutination of terminology the metamorphosis of the arts the derestriction of controversy the disobfuscation of the sciences the obfuscation of concepts and personal ultra-Qigong actualization which is superior functionalization. The sea of change is boundless: Butter is the oar that drives us; there is no road to paradise: Bread is our bridge! Of course, bread and butter are not like some bomb that a hypothetical enemy has dropped on us, don't I know this? I am not uneducated, don't I have common sense? However, we have to continually pose questions, set targets, a country without goals is like a man without a head: he doesn't know his potential."

"Alright, alright already! The general direction of progress remains the same, stop your fighting." Grandfather said. And everyone stopped arguing.

My son roused himself for vigorous efforts to make the country prosperous. The next day, naturally, it was butter and bread and scrambled eggs and milk and coffee. Sister Xu and Grandmother do not drink coffee and milk, so Uncle suggested that they heat and dress the wok with some green onions, then add some wild peppers, some cinnamon, fennel, black pepper, seaweed, and dried hot peppers, heat it until it is smoking, then add some Guangdong Laochou, shrimp soy sauce, and when hot, put this mess into the coffee to suppress the strange odor and flavor of the coffee and milk. I took a sip of it, and naturally it was much easier to bear and to accept. I wanted to add some of the stuff to my coffee, but I saw the murderous look in my son's eyes, and for the sake of my son, sacrificed my tastebuds and forced myself to drink the vile brew hot. Ohhh man! The little spoiled Chinese emperors the "four-two-one [four grandparents, two parents, one child] syndrome" has produced! Where are they taking the country?

Within three days the whole household was in an uproar. Sister Xu had contracted acute poison-related enterogastritis, was sent to the hospital and it was suspected to be complicated by intestinal cancer. Grandmother contracted non-A non-B type cirrhosis of the liver brought on by nerves. After eating the western food Grandfather became constipated; Father and Uncle, both filial sons, took turns caring for him, using bamboo chopsticks to break it up and poke it out, but that was not very effective. Cousin came down with an intestinal obstruction, the pain was like her guts were tied in knots; they performed emergency surgery on her. Cousin's husband got a toothache and a festering sore on his mouth. My wife was forced to vomit after every meal; after purging herself of the western food she sneaked over to her mother's house for thin gruel and pickled vegetables, but

did not dare let my son catch on. The most frightening aspect of this was that within three days we had spent what would formerly have been one month's food allowance. My son proclaimed that without additional funds even supplying thin gruel and pickled vegetables would be impossible. When things got to this point, I had to show my face. I found Father and Uncle and suggested that we immediately relieve my son of his power and restore the household to its normal life!

Father and Uncle had no recourse but to go to Grandfather, Grandfather had no recourse except to go to Sister Xu. Sister Xu, however, was still in the hospital and moreover declared that after she got out of the hospital she was never going to cook again. If people thought that she was useless, well then they could fire her. Grandfather had no choice but to declare in ten different ways and swear a dozen different times that he absolutely never had any such idea and went on to reaffirm his personal principles of human relations. Man is born into this world and bonds of friendship are of the utmost importance, Sister Xu completed the bonds of friendship in our household, she was closer to Grandfather than his own blood relations, closer to him than his own flesh and blood. Each day that Sister Xu is with us is a day that we partake of the vicissitudes of life at her side. If there should come the day that we were left with only one mantou in the house, there absolutely would be one piece for Sister Xu. If we were down to one bowl of soup for the family, Sister Xu would be sure to get her three spoonfuls. If riches came, Sister Xu would be a beneficiary; if poverty were our lot, Sister Xu would be comfortably settled. How could there be logic in having benefited from a person and then just discarding her? Grandfather spoke very movingly and presented his views quite vehemently, the tears flowing freely. Sister Xu listened very attentively and her heart was warmed, and the tears began to run. Finally the hospital nurse decided that their meeting was not doing the patient any good and urged Grandfather to bottle up his tears and return home.

When Grandfather returned home he convened a plenary session, proclaimed that he was old and weak and had no preconceived ideas about what to eat or how to eat and other such related matters, much less did he want to wield sole authority over this, but you had to come to me and the only thing for me to do was to go to Sister Xu. Sister Xu has hardened her heart because of your grumblings, and because she ate great-grandson's western food she's got blocked intestines, and I am not able to care about this anymore, just go and eat whatever you want to eat. "If I don't have anything to eat, starving to death would suit me fine." Grandfather had spoken.

Everyone looked at everyone, everyone started giving their opinions. All agreed that it was still Grandfather who ran things best, for half a century, old and young, peaceful and content, four generations living in harmony. Cousin stated that she was going to cook for Grandfather on a daily basis. That is to say, she, her

husband, Grandfather, Grandmother and Sister Xu were one group, and would prepare and eat their own food. Father declared that he and Mother would form one group, and could not care less what my wife and I did. Because we had this new-wave son, it was impossible to eat with them. I declared my wife and myself one group. Then there were Uncle and Aunt as another group. And then finally, my son as a group of one. Cousin, viewing the situation, seemed quite satisfied and made her pronouncement: "Each eating his own, now this is a bit more modern! Having four generations under one roof all eating together was too much like something out of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Besides, having too many people squeezing around one table, it was tight and also real easy to pass on hepatitis!" Cousin's husband had a question: "Do they have large families like this in America? Are they able to have this many generations overcome the 'generation gap' and eat together?" Grandfather's expression, for some reason, had a touch of sadness.

We dined in separate groups for two days and then the system fell apart. At a little past 11:00 Cousin's group appropriated the fire to cook their meal, and because they were working under Grandfather's name and authority, the rest of us could only stare at the stove expectantly and sigh. Then Father's group and then Uncle's group. By the time it was my turn, it was already two in the afternoon, and the only thing I could do was give it up and go to work, after which, at the evening meal, we sat, stared at the stove expectantly, and sighed. There followed discussions, deliberations, discourses, and consultations on the question of each group setting up its own stove. Bottled gas stoves were out of the question; the last time when we got the one bottled gas stove we had to make 14 individual visits to the appropriate people, had people for dinner seven times, presented two scroll paintings, sent five cartons of cigarettes, bought eight bottles of booze, and it took 13 months and 13 days to accomplish, and left us too tired to eat or shit. To buy a charcoal stove you had to go through the red tape too, and without a permit you cannot buy charcoal. Even if we had the permit and could find the charcoal, we had no vacant spot to stick the stove into. If we were to install four stoves in accordance with modern concepts, we would first have to expand the kitchen area by 30 square meters; of course, the best idea would be to build four separate kitchens, but the very best idea was to build five new houses. People's consumer demands were like wild horses escaping the corral; little wonder that every newspaper you pick up has reports about overheated consumerism, that the more they talk about it the worse it is. And then suddenly we were not going to build houses but discuss modern concepts of consciousness and personal privacy rights and so on and so fucking-when-I-stand-up-to-talk-my-back-doesn't-hurt-forth stuff and related nonsense.

The soft science research into separate stoves did not accomplish diddly squat. An entire canister of gas was

used up in nine days. Since they began limiting the supplies of liquefied petroleum this year, for an entire year there are only a dozen or so coupons, and only by using one tank for at least a little more than 25 days can one possibly guarantee a family's cooking and boiled water. Using one tank in nine days, a year's worth of coupons would be gone in four months, and who would we turn to for the remaining eight months? This not only wrecked our own familial procedures but also wrecked the State's national plan!

The masses were panic stricken, moaning and groaning, full of grievances, complaints arising on all sides. Somebody said that after the bottled gas was used up we could start eating prepackaged noodles. Some suggested that we limit each group to 17 minutes food preparation time. Someone said that trying to use separate stoves for separate meals at the present time, the production relationships would supersede the development of the productive forces. Someone said the more we reformed the worse it got and nothing was as good as having Grandfather in control and Sister Xu running things. Someone else lashed out at the United States saying that Americans were nothing but wild animals, with no sense of filial duty, brotherly love, family loyalty, or trustworthiness and so naturally do not have extended families. We have the superior traditions of family morality, so why do we have to be learning from America? The whole family was embarrassed and also could not bear to go again to trouble Grandfather, so without consulting, but of one mind, they sought out Cousin's husband.

Cousin's husband was the only one in the family that had tread on foreign soil; within the past two years he had had two western style suits made, had bought three ties, had gone to the United State for six months of advanced studies, had toured in Japan for 10 days, had been sent to West Germany and had visited seven cities there. He had been around and seen a lot, had a modicum of urbanity, was able to say "Thank you" and "Pardon me" in nine languages, was the one person in our family with real talent and a solid education. It was only because he was an in-law, and deeply conscious of being an outsider, that he had never argued or pontificated or been haughty or shown his temper, knew when to give in, was able to feel at home under any circumstances, and so had won our deep respect.

Now, seeing our extreme sincerity and the sad vision of an entire family trapped in a difficult situation, he drew out from the bottom of his heart and brought forth to the light of day the real goods. He said:

"The way I see it, the fundamental problem with our family is still one of organizational system. Whether or not we eat toasted sliced mantou is really an insignificant question. The crux of the matter is, who is going to decide this, and what sort of procedure will be used to decide the menu? Will it be a feudal patriarchy? Will it be done by rank and longevity? Or through anarchy? Or opportunism, and we will eat whatever someone decides

to prepare? Will we follow some menu in a cookbook? By apriorism or just from necessity? The crux of the matter is democracy; lacking democracy even if you eat well, it doesn't taste good. Without democracy your diet may be a total mess, but no one will stand forth to undertake the responsibility for beginning the reforms with himself. Without democracy one eats in a completely muddle-headed fashion, you eat sugar and don't realize it is sweet, you eat bitter melon and do not appreciate its sourness, for neither sweetness nor bitterness have anything to do with your own choices! Without democracy, one moment you are apathetic for having lost the main concept of eating causing the main corpus of eating to be transmogrified into a feces factory. The next moment everything is topsy-turvy, everyone going his own way, doing things rashly, eager for the quick success and instant benefit, taking shortsighted measures, dumping our troubles in other people's laps, causing the main corpus of eating to be inflated into some sort of demonic stomach with no head! Without democracy you do not have a vote, and without a vote you have lost your identity!"

Everyone listened, all feeling as if they had suddenly been filled with enlightenment, and nodded their heads and voiced approval without end.

Cousin's husband, getting this encouragement, continued: "As far as considering rank and seniority goes, in a stagnated agricultural society, it has not been lost as a viable sequence, such a precedence is especially suited to the illiterates and the idiots. Even the congenitally feeble can understand and can accept this type of rigidity, this type of quietude, this type of—may I call it—ossified order, but it has strangled competition, strangled people's activism and creativity and changeability, and if there was no change there would be no human race, if there were no change, we would still be apes. Besides, deferring to rank and seniority suppresses the newly emerging forces. The time when a person's energy is most abundant, his intellect most active, and his pursuits most intense should be the period before he is 40 years old. However during this same period they are oppressed under the lowest level..." "Absolutely right!" My son shouted. He was so moved tears were flowing down his cheeks.

I silently waved a hand at my son. Ever since his breakfast westernization program had failed, his image in the household had not been the best, having something of the risk-taker, the empty-talker, the too-few-accomplishments, too-many-failures, and even the rebel taint to it. Cousin and her husband were among those who looked askance at my son with something less than approbation. His jumping in would be less help than hindrance to Cousin's husband.

I asked: "What you say is correct. But what are we really going to do?"

Cousin's husband replied: "Give play to democracy, hold an election! A democratic election, this is the key, this is the point where the acupuncture needle goes in, this is the nose of the ox where the ring goes, this is the center of the bull's-eye. Everyone goes up for election! Everybody discusses everything, everyone makes their bid, telling how much money you are going to collect, how much voluntary service you are going to expect of everyone, what kind of food you are going to provide the family, what kind of treatment and payment you expect individually, it is all open and public, all transparent, all regularized, standardized, legalized, proceduralized, systematized and done scientifically, and finally it all depends upon the voting, depends upon the voters' impartial decisions, the minority submitting to the majority. The minority submits to the majority—this in and of itself is the new concept, the new spirit, the new order, which stops ossification, and also eliminates the anarchic following of one's own desires..."

Father gave it some serious thought for a long while, and the wrinkles on his face seemed to deepen with his thinking. Finally, he expressed his opinion, saying: "Okay, I approve. However, there are two problems, the first being whether Grandfather will agree, and the second being Sister..."

Cousin said: "Grandfather presents no problem. Grandfather's thinking is the latest, and as far as cooking goes, he tired of that long ago. Sister Xu is the trouble spot..."

My son got impatient, and shouted: "Just where does Sister Xu fit into this family? She's not a constituent member of this family, so she has no right to vote and no right to be elected."

Mother unhappily said: "Grandson, grandson, stop butting in, okay? You should not look at the fact that Sister Xu does not carry our name or that Sister Xu is not of our clan. What are you trying to say? To say that Sister Xu does not have the right to vote and cannot be elected is wrong! There is nothing that we have done that we have not discussed thoroughly with Sister Xu—think about it! I have been in this family my entire life, don't I know something? What do you know about it?"

Cousin and her husband parted ways and started to argue. Her husband thought that to acknowledge Sister Xu's special position was to deny democracy and if we accepted democracy we could not accept Sister Xu's special position; this was a fundamental question of principle and there was no room for compromise. Cousin held that, if I stand up and talk my back doesn't hurt, what good does it do to shout stuff and nonsense that is totally divorced from reality? To look down upon Sister Xu is to despise our traditions, and if we despise our traditions we have no foundation to stand on, and if we are without foundations then all proposals for reform are nothing but cloud-cuckoo-land fantasies. And such fantastic reforms are nothing but a rejection of reform. Cousin showed no respect for her husband in her speech,

and flatly declared to him: "Don't think that just because you went to a couple of national conventions and can speak a few phrases of foreign languages that you're anything special; you may be a member of this household, but you aren't anywhere as important as Sister Xu."

Cousin's husband became beet red as he listened; he smiled coldly for a few long seconds and then turned and stormed out of the room.

A few days later, it was finally Uncle who spoke up, pointing out that the two problems were actually only one problem. Sister Xu might be stubborn, but she obeyed Grandfather in everything, and if Grandfather approved of something then she also agreed; there really was no need for these fierce struggles between these artificial democratic processes and Sister Xu, and even less is there any need to intensify these artificial struggles.

Everyone listened, saw the reason in his words, and were suddenly enlightened. All these various troubles were from the beginning worries about imaginary difficulties and contradictions; if you say they are great, then they are great, if you say they are insignificant, then they are, if you say they exist, then they do exist, if not, then not. In seeking out the point where all of these different ideas came together, we became relaxed and easy, harmonious and united as one, this was really a great work! Suddenly filled with complete confidence, even Cousin and my son were so happy they could not keep from smiling.

Elected by popular demand, Father and Uncle went to talk to her and the idea went over immediately. Sister Xu, totally averse to any elections, stated: "Why do you want to go through all that rigamarole?" However, she also indicated that, having gotten sick, gone to the hospital and come from the hospital, she absolutely would not get involved in these affairs and absolutely would not stand in the way. "If your family starts eating houseflies than I will eat houseflies too, if you want to eat mosquitoes, then I will eat mosquitoes too, just don't ask me about anything." She also was totally unconcerned as to whether she had the right to vote, and would not express any opinion, and she made it totally clear that she would not participate in any of our household discussions.

From the looks of it, Sister Xu had voluntarily withdrawn from the stage of history, and by popular demand Cousin's husband would oversee the election. As the day of election drew near, the household took on a festive air. The house was swept out, the windows washed, scrolls were hung, a flower vase was brought out and filled with newly marketed plastic silk flowers. Democracy gave birth to a new atmosphere, a new faith. The day finally arrived, Cousin's husband put on his earth-tone western suit which he had worn when touring Europe, donned a black tie, and looking much like an orchestra conductor, oversaw the momentous events. The first thing he did

was request the candidates standing for election to each give a "How I will run the household government" speech.

No one said anything, all was quiet. We could hear the flies buzzing in the kitchen.

Cousin's husband was surprised. "What? No one wants to run for election? Don't you all have solutions, ideas, and opinions?"

I said: "Cousin, you speak first, okay? Set the example. The family does not have any democratic customs, so naturally they are shy."

Cousin cut me off: "Don't let him speak, this has nothing to do with him."

Cousin's husband kept calm, and with the style of the educated gentry he explained: "I am not running for election. My idea in suggesting employing democracy was not to seek personal power. If you elected me, it could only be a discredit to the democratic process. Besides, right now I am in the process of applying for self-supported study overseas and have already made contact with several large universities in North America and Oceania, and I am only waiting until I have had time to exchange enough money on the black market for U.S. dollars, and I will be saying good-bye to all of you. If any of you would like to help me out by lending me some money, I would welcome it very much; you would be lending me Renminbi and I guarantee that I would repay you in foreign currency. Now this is...."

Everyone looked at each other in speechless despair, everyone was totally deflated. And, without a word but in perfect unison, they all thought to themselves: Holding an election for manager of the household government, haven't we got better things to do? This is all hot air, selling quack remedies, not showing respect for our elders and harming all those around us, did you think we are not going to jump through this hoop? Did you think we would really let you run the house? Can you satisfy each of us? Having our meal already prepared but not eating it and holding an election, if that isn't taking the wrong medicine for our troubles, what is? And they went on thinking: Why are we holding these damn elections anyway? All these years we never had democratic elections, and we still had gruel and pickled vegetables and fried noodles to eat like always! All these years we never had democratic elections and we never starved to death or died from over-eating, we didn't have to eat bricks or drink dog piss and we didn't get the noodles stuck up our noses or crammed up our asses. I've had it up to here with your damned democracy, it's finally enough to make me shit; if we're going to go hungry then let's go hungry and be done with it! That is the way Chinese are, they never attain peace of mind until they've gone over something so often they are sick of it.

Since they said it would be democracy then there was going to be democracy. Since they said there would be an election then there eventually was going to be an election. Since they had come together and even Grandfather had joined them, then the ceremonies would be carried out according to the correct protocol. Besides, who could say that democratic elections were necessarily a bad thing? If the right person was elected, from here onward the food would be both nutritious and tasty, would both treat the yin deficiencies of the body and invigorate the yang elements, would benefit the blood and supplement the qi, it would strengthen the physique and not harm the meridians and be refreshing, it would have color plus aroma plus flavor, it would save on food money and conserve resources, it would correspond to health standards and economize on preparation work, it would eliminate greasy smoke and noise, and everyone would have the authority to voice their comments, and individually no one would have to fret, there would be someone in charge, but it would not be a tyrant lording it over us, we would not have to eat leftovers and yet would not waste food supplies, we would eat blood clams but not get hepatitis, we could eat fish and shrimp but without the stench of fish ... and so on and so forth; if the results of the democratic elections could turn out like this, what sage under heaven would not agree to democratic elections?

And so the election started. The ballots were written out, inspected and counted. Eleven ballots were issued, and 11 ballots were turned back in; the first vote was official. There were four blank ballots, that is, no candidate's name was written in on the ballot. On one ballot someone had written: "Anyone," the equivalent of a blank ballot, for a total of five blank ballots. There were two votes for Sister Xu. Grandfather got three votes. My son, one vote.

Now what? Grandfather got the most votes, but not half the votes, and not even enough for a third of the total. Did this mean he was elected? We had not discussed this before voting. We asked Cousin's husband for advice. He said that there were two types of "law" in the world, written law and unwritten law. Unwritten law in the strict legal sense was not law. For instance, consecutive terms of the president of the United States was not clearly defined in the Constitution. In actuality, it was a law because everyone followed it. The basic tenet of democracy is that the minority obeys the majority. What is a majority? A relative majority? A simple majority (that is, over one-half)? This depends upon tradition and also upon one's viewpoint. As far as this election of ours goes, since it was our first trial run, and since everyone is our own flesh and blood, father, son, and brother, in this case we could do whatever everybody wanted to do.

Cousin said that since Grandfather had received the most votes, naturally he had been elected, this was not and could never ever be the feudal patriarchal consciousness but was modern democratic consciousness. Cousin went on to proclaim: In our house, feudalistic patriarchal

consciousness does not exist, even less is it the most critical danger or the main contradiction; what we really must be alert for is anarchism wearing the antifeudalist cap, liberalism, self-centered solipsism, advanced consumerism, hedonism, the American-moon-is-round-er-than-the-Chinese-moonism, and foreign doctrinairism.

My son was suddenly very excited and solemnly declared that the one vote that he had received, he had not cast for himself. He got to this point and I felt the eyes on all sides turn and lock on me, as though I might have voted for my son, as if I had indulged in unhealthy tendencies toward familial partiality in voting. I blushed even while thinking who would think this of me? Why would someone think this of me? Did he know that I actually did not vote for my son and even if I did vote for my son that is no sort of unhealthy tendency because even if I did not vote for my son I still could only vote for my father or vote for my uncle or vote for my mother or vote for my wife or vote for Sister Xu; besides, according to the latest Freudian theories how could Cousin be better qualified than my son, who quite possibly had some Oedipal complex about murdering his father and bedding his mother, didn't they know? Why is it that the minute my son opens his mouth they all start wondering about me?

My son began shouting. He said that the fact that he had received one vote proved that his popular support was not dead the spark had not died and the bonfire would again roar into flame. He said that the reason he wanted to take care of the reform of our family's meals was entirely from a spirit of selfless contribution, it came from cherishing traditional humanism and a deep love of each individual. When he got to the word love, tears as big as beans dropped from the corner of his eyes. He said that although our family did have order it lacked love, and order without love was exactly the same as marriage without love; it was in fact immoral. He said that he could have long ago thrown off the yoke of this family's meal system, he could go his own way and begin eating snails eating cheese eating asparagus tuna eating lobster eating veal eating Kentucky Fried Chicken sandwiches McDonalds and apple pie cinnamon ice cream pudding. He said that he dearly loved his aunt but he was unable to accept her viewpoint, although it sounded very comforting and reasonable.

At this point Uncle interposed (please note: he interposed, he did not interrupt; it is impolite to interrupt, whereas interposing is a cordial, intelligent, democratic, to be blunt, a promotional suggestion type of comment), saying that Cousin's formulation of the major contradiction and the major dangers for which we must presently be alert did not coincide with a formal proposition. Perhaps it would be best not to overemphasize that any one aspect is the main danger. This is because a half a century of experience with medical treatment has proven that if you indicate that constipation is the main danger it will lead immediately to universal diarrhea, and end

up with stores sold out of antidiarrheal medicines and a psychology of negativism towards the medical profession. On the other hand, if you say that diarrhea is the greatest danger you immediately induce general constipation of the bowels, which leads to the onset of hemorrhoidal inflammation and irritability from the discomfort and continual quarrels. Internal heat is caused by internal fires, and water is needed to control the flames. Only when the five elements are in harmony is true health possible. Therefore, we must not only avoid constipation but also diarrhea. Constipation is bad and diarrhea is not better. If constipation happens, then cure the constipation; if diarrhea happens, then cure the diarrhea. It would be best if there were neither constipation nor diarrhea. This excellent speech received a weak round of applause.

After the applause died away, however, they discovered that the problem was still not solved, and having heatedly discussed the sources of disharmony among the five elements and the metabolic processes, it seemed as if some stimulation had occurred, for everyone was now hungry, and all agreed that since Grandfather had gotten the most votes, Grandfather should still be in charge.

Grandfather did not approve of this. He stated that food preparation was a technological matter and not an ideological matter or a matter of viewpoint, or a matter of hierarchy (grade) or service or power or position or a matter of compensation. Therefore, we should not be electing some leading persons but simply select the best cook, and let it all depend upon one's cooking, frying, and preparation skills.

My son voiced a cheer of approval, and most felt that indeed a new idea had been ventured and a new breakthrough achieved. Others, on the other hand, indicated that it was getting late, and they were already hungry. Even if the question of who would be in charge of food and cooking was still in the process of investigation and discussion, time was up, and food must still be of necessity eaten; if a decision had been reached we had to eat and if a decision had not been reached we still had to eat. If you support the outcome of the discussion you had to eat and if you opposed the outcome of the discussion you still had to eat. Allow us to eat and we will eat, don't allow us to eat and we will still want to eat. And so.... we all split up and went to eat.

In order to test and evaluate culinary abilities, a great many procedures were set up: Each person had to steam one tray of mantou, make one pot of slow cooked rice, fry two eggs, slice up one dish of pickled vegetables, cook one dish of gruel, prepare one plate of red cooked pork, and so forth. In order to design this process, our family carried on discussions for 30 days and 30 nights. There were debates, there was excitement, there were arguments, tears were shed and reconciliations made. Finally we were too tired to take a breath, to take a leak, or take a step. Although some damage was done to our amiability, we also increased our unity and exchanged ideas

and feelings. Although our spirits got tired, a lot of interest and excitement were aroused. When the subject of frying two eggs was brought up, everyone rocked with laughter as if they had gotten some secret suggestive inspiration. When preparing pickled vegetables was mentioned, everyone sank into melancholic deep silence, as if they had suddenly aged greatly. In the end, after all, our culinary skills were evaluated. And the evaluations made were so agreeable that no one had any more to say.

The outcome of the evaluations, by ranking, were: first class first grade: Grandfather and Grandmother; first class second grade: Father, Mother, Aunt and Uncle. Second class, first grade: myself, my wife, Cousin, and Cousin's husband. Third class, first grade: my beanpole of a son. Fearing that my son would feel put upon, everyone agreed that although my son was third class, we would award him a "special merit award as our most promising star." Despite the fact that he got a special award and was pronounced a "star hope," he was still third class. In the end, the theoretical nomenclature might be brand new, but the order of precedence was ages old.

A great deal of time passed and without really thinking about it, we realized that despite the fact that the order remained the same as always, the discussion and experimenting with the theoretical titles naturally cooled off. The question of cooking and eating no longer provoked differences of opinion and aroused emotions. Whether cooking and eating were a question of skills or a systemic problem, or a question of cultural outlook or some other heretofore never considered type of question, no longer disturbed our minds. Sister Xu passed away peacefully, of natural causes. She was taking a noon nap one day and still had not awakened by four o'clock, and when we went in to look for her, she had already stopped breathing. The entire family loved her and respected her and mourned her passing. My son went off to work for a Sino-foreign joint venture, and quite possibly he has now achieved his dream of daily consuming bread, butter, and great amounts of animal protein. On holidays he comes home, and when we ask him for suggestions as to what to eat, he says that he has eaten all the good things and now the only thing he wants to eat is gruel and pickled turnips, and some broth and fried noodles with bean sauce. Having said this, he consoles himself by saying: Viewpoints are easy to change, but tastes are hard to change! Uncle and Aunt were allotted an apartment in a newly constructed building and moved out. They have piped-in gas and an exhaust fan in their kitchen, and doing their cooking in a brand new kitchen, have already made both red-cooked pork and fried eggs; but they say that they normally just eat gruel, toasted mantou, pickled turnips, broth, and fried noodles in bean sauce. Cousin's husband eventually went abroad to "pursue advanced studies" and is going to school and holding down a job; finally Cousin went to be with him, and they wrote saying: "In this foreign land, we most often eat gruel and pickled vegetables, and when we eat them, we are filled with the fondest memories and are no longer troubled at

heart because we are in a strange land, and it seems as if we had returned to our beloved simple home. What is there to do? Perhaps there are inherited gruel and pickled vegetable genes in our cells; could that be?"

I and Father and Grandfather are living happily together. Our intake of chicken, duck, fish, meat, eggs, milk, sugar, and butter has increased, and we have all gained weight. The foods set out on our table are ever more abundant, varied, and of higher quality. We have had braised sliced meat and sea slugs with onions. We have had deep fried peanuts and also cake with frosting. There have been cold gelatin-sheet dishes and crab meat salad and once we even had abalone scallops. The abalone came and it went, the sea slugs came and went, we ate the salad and forgot about it. Only gruel and pickled vegetables were permanently there. Despite the fact that for one birthday we had "seven seas delicacies," after we were done with it, we still wanted a course of gruel and pickled vegetables. And after that our mouths and esophagus and stomach and intestines and liver and pancreas could all operate stably and normally; if we ever forget to add the gruel and pickled vegetables, we immediately suffer from bloating and stomach aches. There is the possibility of contracting cancer. The fact that up to now we have not contracted intestinal cancer is to the credit of the gruel and pickled vegetables, surely! Gruel and pickled vegetables are the unchangeable key links in our food net. Everything else is just so much accompaniment, so much background—one might say, the "meshes" in the net.

After Sister Xu passed away, the responsibility for preparing food fell upon Mother's shoulders. Before every meal was prepared, Mother would, as always, go and ask Grandfather and Grandmother: "Soup—should I make a soup or not? The meat? Do you want it sliced or shredded?" The age-old query was at once both respectful and sorrowful. It was a type of procedure and was even more a type of ethical sentiment. This query and reply which on the surface was bland and even vacuous conveyed with it the memory of Sister Xu, and everyone felt that although Sister Xu had passed away she was still alive, and her example still survived. Grandfather time and again indicated that as long as there were gruel, pickled vegetables, toasted mantou slices, and fried noodles in bean sauce, he did not want to be troubled about the question of whether to prepare a soup, whether to slice or shred the meat, or whether to add a dish of seven seas delicacies, and he wished that Mother would not bother him with these questions, which were getting harder and more difficult to decide. Mother said yes, yes, but if she did not ask, she always felt a bit uneasy. When the meal was cooked and everyone called to the table, she would be looking left and right fidgeting on a bed of needles, trying to figure out everyone's—especially Grandfather's—expression. If Grandfather coughed once, Mother would immediately start muttering. Is there sand in the gruel? Are the pickled vegetables salty enough or are they too salty? She would mutter and mumble, but would never dare to

directly and immediately solicit opinions. Besides, even if she had asked Grandfather, there was no way to guarantee that there was no sand in the gruel.

Anyway, again on another day, when dusk was drawing nigh, when Mother, loyally and obediently, feeling trembly and especially filled with fear and trepidation, went and asked Grandfather—sliced meat or shredded? The question was posed in the most tactful manner. And Grandfather's reply? Call it kindly but gruff. Anyway, he answered: "Don't ask me!" which was the same as a reply. And so Mother could with peace of mind go about her kitchen duties. An English friend—a friend of Father's for the past 40 years—came to China on tour, and came to live with us for a week. In the beginning we specifically hired a western chef from Shanghai to make him bread and cake and cheese and steak. Our English friend said to us frankly: "I did not come here to eat western food or things that are called but really are nothing like western food. How about making some of your traditional and uniquely fascinating food for me, please, I beg of you, okay?" What were we to do? There was nothing to do but to very embarrassedly serve him some gruel and pickled vegetables.

"Wow, how simple! How delicate! How nice! How very cultured!... Only the ancient East has such mystical food!" Such was the Englishman's praise. We recorded, in standard Oxfordian English, his praises of gruel and pickled vegetables on the cassette recorder and played it back for my beanpole of a son.

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Story Critiqued as 'Attack' on Socialist Reform

HK2310020791 Beijing WENYI BAO in Chinese
14 Sep 91 p 4

[Reader's Letter by Shen Ping (1957 1627); this letter was also reprinted in Beijing ZUOPIN YU ZHENG-MING No 12, 17 Dec 91 on p 76; also published in FBIS-CHI-91-205, 23 Oct 91 pp 31-32]

[Text] Comrade editor: How are you? Good works have been cropping up in recent years and socialist art and literature are prospering and thriving, which is encouraging. I think this has to do with the promotion of frequent artistic and literary award activities. Awards, if a correct standard is adhered to and quality of works are the focus of attention, can have the function of increasing motivation and promoting prosperity.

There are problems with individual artistic and literary award activities, however. For instance, the first of the awarded short stories in the fourth (1989-90) Hundred Flowers Award, carried in the seventh issue of this year's XIAOSHUO YUEKAN [SHORT STORY MONTHLY], was "Hard Thin Gruel." This, in my opinion, was very improper.

"Hard Thin Gruel" was published in the second edition of ZHONGGUO ZUOJIA [CHINESE WRITERS] in 1989. I believe that all of us still vividly remember the political climate of the time. Around the winter of 1988 or early 1989, a very small number of people sticking with bourgeois liberalization preached that the way out for reform lay in changing the public ownership order and pursuing privatization. Some Hong Kong and Macao newspapers were also clamoring that "the old masters of the house can now retire." The short story "Hard Thin Gruel" was published at this time and, incidentally, was about reforms. The story was about a big family of four generations in the throes of reform in "family affairs" and trying to push through "catering improvement." "Catering improvement," in fact, is nothing more than the intention to give a little variety to the usual breakfast diet of "thin gruel and pickles." But in describing such a petty matter, the author employs a variety of big political terms, and shows us how the 80-year-old "Grandpa" leads and manipulates the "reform" behind and before the scene, and how the frequent change of the "hosts of family affairs" is made at his authorization, consent, or tacit permission. The procedures for "family affairs" and breakfast diet also change frequently. After repeated fuss, the family members finally understand that the essence of the "reform" is that "theory, methods, and names may constantly be changing. But there will forever be the same order." And so everybody ceases caring for "reform" and their breakfast remains "gruel and pickles."

In the seventh issue of this year's XIAOSHUO YUEKAN, reviewers told us that "Hard Thin Gruel" is a "fable" in a "light comedy" style and from it we can detect "troubled thoughts on the difficulty of China's reform." In fact, according to the short story's moral, not only is there "difficulty for China's reform"; there is simply no hope for it. Even the "thin gruel and pickles" in the morning cannot be "reformed," and the problem lies with the "family," "Grandpa" and "order." Therefore, this kind of "reform" does not deserve concern and care.

ZHONGGUO DALU [MAINLAND CHINA MONTHLY] of Taiwan carried "Hard Thin Gruel" in its entirety last April, capping the story with an editorial remark that "this story criticizes in the fashion of satire the CPC system under Deng Xiaoping's leadership." It seems that this editor had much sharper political acumen than a certain number of people.

We should fully affirm the results achieved in the new era inaugurated by reform and opening up. In any case, the veiled attacks and jibes by "Hard Thin Gruel" at our country's socialist reform are politically not commendable. Why were magazines willing to publish such a story, which was then cited and awarded, just when we were about to conduct reform and opening up with greater efforts and perfect and develop socialism? Is it good or bad for writers? Is this meant to be encouraging

and promote prosperity or stir up energy to do bad things? I hope that the award organizers will give it serious consideration.

I am not at all sure if the opinion above is reasonable, but, at the risk of being impolite, I put it to you in anticipation of your correction.

Story Critiqued as Targeting Party Elders

*HK1811074391 Beijing WENZHAI BAO in Chinese
No 873, 27 Oct 91 p 5*

[Article by Chun Yushui (3196 0060 3055) and Lin Zhai (2651 2298): "Why Is the 'Thin Gruel' 'Hard?"; originally carried in ZHONGLIU [MIDSTREAM] No 10, 1991; reprinted in Beijing ZUOPIN YU ZHENGMING No 12, 17 Dec 91 pp 76-77; also published in FBIS-CHI-91-222, 18 Nov 91 p 25]

[Text] In the month of June just passed, I learned the news of "Hard Thin Gruel" winning an award. What is more, it won the honorary title of the best "Bai Hua" novelette. The deep impression after two years immediately awakened me.

The novelette came into being between the spring and summer two years ago. It was first carried in the April issue of a large literary periodical in Beijing and then reprinted in a literature magazine of a certain locality. The novelette indeed attracted public attention. It went against the position advocated time and again by the author that literature and art should not be limited to education and understanding to the neglect of its role in other fields. In fact, the novelette was directly coordinated with the "current task." It is by no means exaggeration to say that the novelette "Hard Thin Gruel" typically and knowingly "sought politics," namely, the most realistic political life.

Of the slogans used by the "elites" to mislead the public at that time, there was one spearheaded at the proletarian revolutionaries of the elder generation, such as "get rid of octogenarian politics," "the old boss should step down".... [ellipsis as published] brazenly making a clamor (even in this year, Su Xiaokang, an "author" who "devoted" himself to "academic study" in Princeton University, slung mud at Professor Gu Yuanshu of Taiwan University, who insisted on loving the motherland and the nation, under a charge of "serving as a jester and schemer of the CPC's 'gang of the elderly'".) What is the story of this novelette about? The plot is not complicated: Over the decades, "our" family had gruel for breakfast. However, "Grandpa is very openminded" and he "often solicits opinions of others: 'Do you have any ideas to improve the livelihood of our family?'" Through all kinds of proposals made and experiments conducted, however, the family failed to reach any agreement. Finally, "Grandpa said on numerous occasions that he will not bother about other issues so long as there is gruel." Even when his instructions are sought, the "answer would be: 'Don't ask me.'" As a consequence,

the practice of taking gruel, "which became a cultural relic after 40 years," had to continue. Is the novelette trying to praise or ridicule the "old man?" The novelette is used as a "paper bullet" definitely "targeted" against the proletarian revolutionaries of the elder generation.

Why has the novelette "Hard Thin Gruel" appeared on the market again two years after the disturbance which took place during the spring and summer of 1989? A critic in charge of assessing the awarded works said: "Hard Thin Gruel" can be regarded as a mental or allegorical work. Viewed from the form of narration, it is an out-and-out realistic work. The author described a family's problems focused on breakfast reform, in which "different readers can make different judgments.... [ellipsis as published] and realize the difficulties in China's reform." These remarks are quite obvious. The speech made by the author after winning the award, which to a certain extent affirmed the critic's conjecture, is more interesting. He said: "My literary career actually started from novels. Later, my attention was focused on short stories and novelettes. I don't know whether this reflects my impetuosity. Both the author and readers are impatient and cannot calm down." What about the readers? If there are too many readers, it would be inappropriate to recklessly make conjectures. I don't think it would matter much even if this question is kept aside. What about the author? It would be unnecessary to make any conjecture as both the man and the works exist. The "impetuosity" and state of "impatience and difficulty to calm down" are quite obvious. It is not hard for the public to read between the lines and find out why he is "impetuous" and "impatient" and why he can't "calm down." Probably for this reason, the bowl of thin gruel is selected, regarded as "sacrificial offerings" for the "two-year memorial ceremony," and presented to the "sacrificial altar." Indeed, this is real "hard thin gruel".... [ellipsis as published]

Nevertheless, there is something difficult for the readers to understand: Why is the thin gruel still hard? No one can give me an answer.

I hope that my views on the novelette are not correct, but it is rather difficult for me to admit that I am wrong because it involves a very important problem which people do not want to see. However, the conclusion drawn is independent of my subjective will. It would be better to let facts, the masses, and time tell the rights and wrongs. What we can do now is to calm down, do not be impetuous, and patiently wait for the answer!

[The date "19 August-18 September 1991" appears at the end of the ZUOPIN YU ZHENGMING reprint of this letter.]

Accepting 'Literary Criticism' Without Resort to Lawsuit

*HK1712032591 Beijing WENYI BAO in Chinese
30 Nov 91 p 3*

[Article by Qian Fan (0578 1581): "Writers Should Deal Correctly With Readers' Criticism"; also published in FBIS-CHI-91-242, 17 Dec 91 pp 26-27]

[Text] A writer's work—be it a novel, a poem, a play or an essay—faces the public and becomes a social phenomenon as soon as it is off the presses.

Accompanying it are the readers or audiences, who cannot help talking about it, having read it or seen it. Those who believe the work to be good will applaud and comment about it with a few words. Regarding applause from readers or audiences, the writer always finds it pleasing and feels happy about it from the bottom of his heart; concerning unfavorable criticism from readers or audiences, a writer with some self-restraint will take it calmly. He will modestly accept the criticism should he find it correct, but will not be swayed by it otherwise. In any case, he should never take it to heart. Under the same circumstances, a writer with little self-restraint will find criticism offensive, get very angry, and even censure the critic for "being leftist," "attacking him with a big stick," and "launching a frame-up against him."

A frame-up involves legal issues. According to the relevant law in China, those who have carried out a frame-up will be dealt with according to the law.

The question is, what does a genuine frame-up refer to? If what the readers discussed was confined to a literary work, it would simply involve the ideological and artistic issues of the work, including criticism of the political tendency of some works involving political issues. In that case, whether the criticism is correct or not, it does not fall into the category of a frame-up. Because different understandings and judgments of a literary work are inevitable and normal, if some criticism is incorrect, it can be corrected through counter-criticism. If a writer resorts to legal action when he holds different views regarding his readers' criticism, how can normal criticism in literature and art take place? If readers' discussions deviate from a specific work and launch personal attacks against the writer with intentional fabrication, this would be a frame-up going beyond literary and artistic criticism. A writer is connected with his works because the ideas contained in his works are, after all, the writer's own, but the writer's condition is not completely identical with that in his works. It is necessary and not difficult to differentiate whether it is a case of launching personal attacks against the writer, deviating from his works, or a case of ideological and artistic analysis and criticism of his works.

If the matter is confined to legal action with regard to an issue of literary and artistic criticism, it is understandable. We may make allowances for it because such a writer has only confused a matter to be settled by legal action with a matter to be settled by literary and artistic criticism and such confusion is just a matter of understanding. However, we might as well advise him to write some counter-criticism articles as a justification instead of spending money on a lawsuit. In this way he may air his own views while refuting his opponents. In addition,

he will help literary and artistic criticism prosper. That is killing two birds with one stone and why shouldn't he do it with pleasure?!

But if someone regards legal action simply as a means, not caring about winning the case but aiming to create sensational news headlines in society, he could, whether deliberately or not, directly or indirectly exaggerate relevant information which he could openly or secretly pass to overseas media—news agencies, radio stations, and the press—starting trouble which could eventually create political news with an international color or a political incident. That would be going too far.... [ellipsis as published]

China has promulgated not only the Constitution, a basic law that protects citizens' freedom of speech and personal freedoms that are inviolable, but also civil rights laws which protect citizens' appropriate rights and interests.

Regarding writers and artists, a special law on authors' rights has been promulgated. These protect normal and appropriate literary and artistic criticism, too. A writer enjoys the freedom to write and readers enjoy their right to criticism, because all criticism, be it literary or artistic, social or involving human relations, is helpful to those being criticized so long as it is free of personal prejudice. It encourages people to conduct self-examination and urges them to make progress. Should anyone, especially a writer, fail to hear readers' criticism but reject any criticism whatsoever, turning a deaf ear to it, or regarding the critic as his sworn enemy, it would be a glaring error. A writer who cannot stand criticism cannot go very far in his attainment. A writer who rejects criticism, no matter how great his reputation, is doomed to be rejected by his readers and the people.

WEN WEI PO Views Wang Meng's Activities

HK1012070491 Hong Kong WEN WEI PO in Chinese
5 Dec 91 p 6

[Report: "Although Wang Meng Has Resigned From His Post as Minister of Culture, He Is Still Busy With Social Activities"; also published in FBIS-CHI-91-238, 11 Dec 91 p 23]

[Text] News from Beijing: After resigning from his post as minister of culture, Wang Meng is still member of the CPC Central Committee, vice chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association, vice president of the Association for International Understanding, and vice president of the China Pen Center; he has a busy social life.

Wang Meng's family life is full of joy. Wang Shan, his eldest son, who lives with him, is the father of a five-year-old boy, and Wang Meng is naturally the grandfather. Wang Shi, his second son, is now studying in the United States, and Wang Yi, his daughter, often comes

home after giving lectures at the University of Agriculture. Laughter can always be heard from their quadrangle.

Of course, Wang Meng has his troubles, too, such as numerous invitation cards, employment contracts, interviews, sudden visitors, and other activities, which occupy a lot of his precious time and often interrupt his thinking. In addition, some individual cases of external interference also require his energy to tackle. A letter to the editor signed by "Shen Ping," which was carried by a certain newspaper on 14 September 1991, is an example. This letter borrowed the words from an editor of Taiwan's MAINLAND CHINA MONTHLY, to link Wang Meng's novel "Hard Thin Gruel," which was carried by Issue No. 2 of CHINESE WRITERS in 1989, with some frightening "big political hats." Wang Meng felt his right of citizen's honor was infringed upon. Many old writers and literary critics also expressed great indignation over the letter.

NANFANG RIBAO Interviews Wang Meng

HK1712131891 Guangzhou NANFANG RIBAO
(WEEKEND SUPPLEMENT) in Chinese 13 Dec 91 p 1

[Article by Liang Mai (2733 6701): "Interviewing Wang Meng"; also published in FBIS-CHI-91-243, 18 Dec 91 pp 35-36]

[Text] I have long wanted to visit Wang Meng, especially after reading and becoming addicted to his column "Book Review," which he initiated in the journal DU SHU [READING]. However, Wang Meng is very "mobile" and unless one has an appointment, one is more likely to miss him. At a seminar on Latin American literature organized by the Academy of Social Sciences Foreign Language Institute, I greeted him hurriedly. A few days later, I heard he was involved in a "lawsuit." So I rushed to see him immediately. Actually, Wang Meng is not aloof, arrogant, or bureaucratic as he is thought of by ordinary people. From afar, he is a world-renowned writer; up close, he is also a trusted friend. The most precious thing about Wang Meng is that scholarly demeanor that reveals itself as he chatters away cheerfully- calm, collected, and unhurried.

When I arrived, Wang Meng was on the telephone. I took the opportunity to search through his several "towering" bookshelves. Wang Meng's works have been translated into almost every language in the world. Different editions of his short story, prose, and essay collections are found lining his shelves. In comparison, some of his works printed by mainland publishing firms appeared to be lost in the huge collection.

A short while later, Wang Meng entered the room. He told me that he has visited many places in the past year or so. He was either invited to take part in some literary activities, or he himself took off for leisurely trips. In particular, he was recently invited to Singapore, where

he participated in the "world writers' week" activities. In short, he was having a fairly good time.

Recently, Wang Meng has also been publishing a number of works, like the *Inspiration From Dream of the Red Chamber*, to be published by the Joint Publishing Company. In Wang Meng's own words: "This book is quite refined." In addition, the People's Literature Publishing House also put out his *Prose on Style and Adventures in Outer Space* (the latter is a collection of short stories), while the Huaxia Publishing Firm is presently preparing publication of yet another of his new works—*I Dreamed of You Again*. Someone actually remarked that the title sounded like the title of a popular song. Wang Meng has also started using a computer, and not his pens, to write.

Wang Meng was the culture minister from 1986 to September 1989 and remains a member of the CPC Central Committee. "Actually, as early as 1 October 1988, I had already presented my resignation to the leading comrades of the party Central Committee," Wang Meng said. "Even before that, I had also told the central authorities repeatedly that I would remain in the position for a maximum of three years. After relinquishing the culture minister's position, it is as you understand and know: less administrative work and better physical health. I have also written a lot of things and published some personal collections."

"A stream of visitors" drops by Wang Meng's house everyday. He has many friends who come to see him, including some very close ones from the literary and arts circle, and others from other circles like reporters. I find that there are increasingly more and more people who ask him to write a foreword for their books. Since they are all friends or are recommended by friends, he naturally finds it hard to turn them down. And once Wang Meng has given his word, he can be expected to write with care and seriousness, regardless of who it may be written for. For instance, Hu Xin sought him out for his *Rain of Roses*; Jiang Kun and Liang Zuo for their collection of comic dialogue, *Daydream at the Mouth of a Tiger*; and even the noted writer Han Shaogong asked him for a similar favor. In the foreword of He Xingan's *Commentary on Shen Congwen*, he wrote: "The writer relies on his own works to attract attention and concern. A writer's fate could also make one sigh and shake one's head. It could sometimes become a work of immense emotional appeal. I do not know if this kind of fate is a kind of sadness."

I personally adore some of Wang Meng's essays written in a flowing style, like *Let's Talk About a Bit of Logic, On Education Fatigue, Understood or Not Understood*, and others. In the preface to *Inspiration From Dream of the Red Chamber*, Wang Meng wrote candidly: "To this day, I have yet to finish reading *Dream of the Red Chamber*, but I have not given up and plan to continue reading it. To a reader like me, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is the only book which one can never finish reading, one can read on forever, and can start from any page."

In his spare time, Wang Meng likes to listen to soft music and go swimming twice a week. He has a special fondness for cats. While his own meal is prepared by other people, Wang Meng personally takes care of his cats' meals.

He said amusingly: "Most people complain about a cat having too many kittens and refuse to have them as pets. I am the opposite. I would never give away any of the kittens."

Wang Meng is 57 years old this year but he appears to be in good spirits and boasts a head of dark hair. Asked about the secret of his youthful looks, he shook his head laughingly: "One, I do not dye my hair, and two, I never use the medicinal herb 101. But my hair has always grown well and dark. It must be some kind of miracle."

Wang Meng may be a proficient writer, but he also indulges in many leisurely pursuits. "Because I believe that as a writer, I should first and foremost maintain an excellent state of mind," Wang Meng said. "Writing is a writer's only and greatest joy." Hence, aside from the "lawsuit" and a long novel he is currently writing, he "lives a carefree life": climbing Xiang Shan to admire the maple leaves, stealing time to return to his hometown for a few days, and sitting around with his townfolk to eat grilled yams and gruel. In a few days, he will be setting off for Hangzhou, where he will take part in the inauguration of a Joint Publishing Company branch there. Before seeing me to the door, Wang Meng said to me with an air of satisfaction: "Before you came here today, I personally kneaded some dough and ate some pancakes and gruel. I particularly love to eat gruel."

Story Characterized as 'Realistic,' 'Allegorical'

92CM0166B Beijing ZUOPIN YU ZHENGMING
[LITERARY WORKS AND CONTENTION]
in Chinese No 12, 17 Dec 91 p 75

[Article: "Commentator's View"]

[Text] According to the July 1991 edition of XIAOSHUO YUEKAN [SHORT STORY MONTHLY], the Fourth SHORT STORY MONTHLY Hundred Flowers Award Ceremony for Outstanding Medium-length and Short Stories was convened in Tianjin on 4 May this year. Over 150 author-recipients, editors, publishing personnel from various areas, literary luminaries, and enterprise representatives attended. A total of 17 works received awards. There was one award for special merit and awards for six medium-length novels, and the list of 10 short stories was headed by Wang Meng's "Hard Thin Gruel" (which had originally appeared in ZHONGGUO ZUOJIA [CHINESE WRITERS] No 2, 1989). Award recipients Bing Xin, Wang Meng, Quan Yanchi, and Jia Ping'ao gave "thank you" speeches. Critic Wang Gan published a long "rambling critique" of the works receiving awards. After "Hard Thin Gruel" received an award, various comments were made across society.

For the convenience of our readers, we are extracting here the comments on Wang Meng's "Hard Thin Gruel" from Wang Gan's "rambling criticism."

Wang Meng's "Hard Thin Gruel" can be called a psychological story and could also be called an allegorical story, but in its narrative form it is nothing less than a realistic novel; the author describes the various disturbances incited in a family over the question of reforming the breakfast meal, and these include the collision of eastern and western cultures, the disharmony created by the generation gap, and the misunderstandings between different clans and the resulting contradictions; the various attitudes toward "gruel" can be described as the psychology of various types and classes of people in contemporary society. A reading of "Hard Thin Gruel" will lead different readers to different judgments; one can read into it a criticism of the frivolous total westernization viewpoint, one can also read into it an analysis of conservative traditionalists and also see worries about the difficulties in China's reforms. Compared with the humorous fantasies "The Subject of Winter" and "Calm Sea After the Storm" which preceded Wang Meng, "Hard Thin Gruel" can be construed as a light comedic realistic novel. I call it an allegorical work because because the characters undergo no development, are not fully developed, and they are by and large only symbols and are handled somewhat in the manner of western abstract art. This differs from characters in other realistic novels which are clearly delineated and so have a kind of formal significance.

WENYI BAO Critique

HK2102093092 Beijing WENYI BAO in Chinese
25 Jan 92 p 3

[Article by Wang Changgui (3769 7022 6311): "Commenting on 'Hard Thin Gruel'"; also published in FBIS-CHI-92-044, 5 Mar 92 pp 18-25]

[Text] I. Why Comment on "Hard Thin Gruel"

Recently, a dispute broke out over "Hard Thin Gruel," a short story published two years ago. This issue has attracted quite a bit of attention. Dozens of overseas press organizations have also made a big fuss about it. What is it all about actually?

In 1989, a writer published a short story, "Hard Thin Gruel," in the No. 2 issue of ZHONGGUO ZUOJIA [CHINESE WRITERS] of that year.

More than two years later, the 1991 No. 7 issue of Tianjin's XIAOSHUO YUEBAO [SHORT STORY MONTHLY] published the results of the "Fourth Hundred Flowers Awards (1989-1990)." What topped the list of prize-winning short stories was none other than "Hard Thin Gruel."

Following that, WENYI BAO carried a "letter to the editor" on 14 September 1991, in which Comrade Shen

Ping [1957 1627] challenged the award to "Hard Thin Gruel." In his letter, he gave a brief analysis of the story and remarked on some relevant commentaries, including a Taiwan journal's editorial note on the full-text reprint of this story. Finally, Comrade Shen Ping said: "Whatever the reason, it is obvious that 'Hard Thin Gruel's oblique attack and ridicule of the socialist reform in our country is politically unacceptable. Why did some journal dig out such a piece of work, commend it, and give it an award, when greater strides are being made to carry out the reform and opening up and to improve and develop socialism? Is this to protect the writer or do him harm? Is this to boost morale and promote prosperity, or to arouse devious enthusiasm? I hope the organizers of the award will think it over."

Can people, including Comrade Shen Ping, challenge the result of the XIAOSHUO YUEBAO award? Yes should be the answer, according to the party's "double-hundred" policy. If someone disagrees with Shen Ping, he is of course allowed to rebut the criticism: They can talk it over and try to find the truth together. Obviously, WENYI BAO's publication of Shen Ping's letter was nothing but a proper move in line with the "double-hundred" policy.

However, "A wind arises, rippling the water in the spring-touched pond." On 19 October 1991, WEN HUI BAO's affiliate DUSHU ZHOUBAO [STUDY WEEKLY] published a "special dispatch from Beijing" by a "staff reporter" entitled "'Hard Thin Gruel' Sets Off a Storm: Wang Meng Appeals to the Beijing Intermediate Court." The "special dispatch" said: "The famous writer Wang Meng has lodged a civil complaint with the Beijing Municipal Intermediate People's Court, charging WENYI BAO and Shen Ping with defamation." It turned out that the author of "Hard Thin Gruel" is none other than Comrade Wang Meng. When commenting on the short story in his letter, Shen Ping omitted the author's name. This may be because Shen Ping directed his objection mainly toward the award, if studied with Mencius's formula of inference, or because Shen Ping was looking at the work only for the purpose of "cherishing the writer," and then went further to criticize XIAOSHUO YUEBAO for "digging it out" and commending it after more than two years, for fear of "doing harm to the writer." If this analysis is roughly correct, it is completely understandable why Shen Ping omitted the author's name, and it would have been out of good intentions. But Comrade Wang Meng, rather than being grateful, lodged a petition, "charging WENYI BAO and Shen Ping with defamation." The "special dispatch" also told us: "This famous writer, member of the CPC Central Committee and former minister of culture, believes" that "WENYI BAO openly published and spread the rumors fabricated in Shen Ping's article," and that if their attempt succeeded, "political libel would become a means of blackmail that lawless persons could employ at any time to realize their selfish intentions." In this way, he put two sensational labels, "political libel" and "lawless persons," on "WENYI BAO and Shen

Ping." Moreover, this "staff reporter" also announced: "It is learned that Wang Meng's petition has been accepted by the Beijing Municipal Intermediate People's Court, and has aroused great concern among art and literature circles and the judicial sector."

In an abnormal course, this affair escalated from "awards" and "objection" to a "petition," which was then lavishly played up by some of the media. Many people started talking about it and speculation was spreading. The focus of public attention was the people's court.

Immediately afterward, DUSHU ZHOUBAO published a "special dispatch from Beijing dated 23 October" on 26 October. The "special dispatch" said: "Because of the illegibility of the telex, we mistook 'sends in a petition' for 'appeals,' and 'received' for 'accepted' in the relevant report carried in our last issue. This is a notice of a correction." It might be possible to accept a problem such as "illegibility of the telex," but to mistake "received" for "accepted" takes extreme "subjectiveness" and imagination. Such an error is indeed hard to understand. This "23 October special dispatch" also reported: "The ruling from the Beijing Municipal Intermediate People's Court issued to Wang Meng yesterday points out that WENYI BAO's publication of Shen Ping's article is a normal means of artistic and literary criticism. On those grounds, it refuses to accept Wang Meng's complaint and says if he decides to reject the ruling, he may appeal to a higher court. Wang Meng lodged the civil complaint with this court on 9 October."

As of this moment, Comrade Wang Meng may continue with his "legal action." But comrades in art and literature circles should calm down and ponder some issues. The trigger to the entire affair was that a journal gave an award to "Hard Thin Gruel." What, then, does this story say? How should we comment on it? Avoiding these questions and going into other issues means attending to trifles while neglecting the essentials. It is not wise to try and make people stop pondering and speaking on these essential questions by using such labels as "political libel" and "lawless persons." Now let us study and comment on the story, with those questions in mind, and with the view of seeking truth from facts.

II. The Story of "Hard Thin Gruel"

"Hard Thin Gruel," about 14,000 characters long, is written in the first person.

The story begins this way: "The formal members of my family comprise Grandpa, Grandma [both paternal], Father, Mother, Uncle [paternal], Auntie [Uncle's wife], myself, Wife, Cousin [female, on father's side], Cousin's Husband, and Son, my most beloved lanky boy. Their ages respectively are 88, 84, 63, 64, 61, 57, 40, 40, and...16." There was an informal member, 59-year-old Sister Xu, who "had been taking care of our household affairs for 40 years." The entire family called her "Sister." "Ours had always been a stable life, one of

unity. For example, Grandpa was always the one to decide whether or not the summer of that year was too hot; whether we should have Longjing tea, eight yuan per liang or Qing tea, 0.4 yuan per liang; and whether we should use White Orchid toilet soap, or Violet, or Gold Shield." For decades, the whole family lived on gruel and pickled vegetables for breakfast, noodles in fried bean sauce for lunch, and rice for dinner. Grandpa even had the final say on whether to have the pork in threads or in flat slices in that half-vegetable, half-meat dinner dish. "Everybody, especially Grandpa, was happy about" this life. "The whole family, headed by Grandpa and Grandma, was the embodiment of the doctrine that contentment brings happiness, and was a faithful supporter of the existing system."

Things suddenly changed in those years, and new winds and new waves kept coming. "Grandpa was very open and liberal-minded. He assimilated new terms and new concepts from the newspapers he read after siestas, and from the radio and television programs he listened to or watched after dinner." Often, he would ask for our opinions: "Is there anything in our life that needs reform and improvement?" "Everybody said no." "The new winds blew ever stronger and the new waves grew ever more vigorous." "Therefore, Grandpa took the initiative to propose a change from the head-of-state system to a cabinet system. He was to make nominations, to be carried by the family plenum. The formal members would govern the family in rotation." "Father was the first to be placed in charge of household affairs, and it was decided after discussion that he would carry out a diet reform."

However, Father "asked Grandpa for advice on everything." This brought more trouble: "Sister Xu would ask Father about something. Father could not make a decision on his own, so he would go and ask Grandpa. He would then pass on Grandpa's words to Sister Xu, constantly referring to Grandpa. This caused more inconvenience than if Sister Xu were to ask Grandpa directly." Furthermore, Father gradually got into the habit of flaunting Grandpa's banner when he was saying or doing something. The rest of the family then started to exchange whispered comments. Grandpa, becoming aware of the situation, helped Father to see that "transferring power to lower levels is a general trend," whereupon Father transferred the authority for the "great cause of cooking" to Sister Xu. After she assumed power, Sister Xu not only made sure that "everything stayed put," but also set aside part of the funds for meals so that she could use "the money saved from our meals to buy some ginseng royal jelly for Grandpa, which meant tightening our belts so that she could pledge her loyalty to Grandpa." This finally led Son to challenge her: "Enough of your low-standard meals! ...Starting from tomorrow, I will take charge, and I will allow everybody to lead a modern life!" Talking volubly, Son called gruel and pickled vegetables "the root of the ultrastability, underdevelopment, and zero progress of our feudal society" and said that it was necessary to "eradicate gruel

and pickled vegetables thoroughly." Cousin took exception to his view. Grandpa said: "All right, all right. The general orientation is the same. Now you stop arguing." So "everybody stopped arguing." Son therefore assumed power.

Sure enough, the next day, Son put in front of us "butter bread tender omelet milk coffee [no punctuation as published]." But three days later, the whole family was suffering various kinds of intestinal and stomach disorders, and the money spent on the food over those three days would normally have lasted a month. Thereupon, "I consulted Father and Uncle, proposing immediate removal of Son's power and normalization of family life!" Father and Uncle could do nothing but seek advice from Grandpa. Grandpa "called a plenum, making it clear that being old and infirm, he had no ready ideas about what to eat, how to eat, or any other relevant issues, and had no intention whatsoever to monopolize power." Grandpa announced: "One can eat whatever one likes to eat." After looking at each other in blank dismay, we decided to split into five groups, each making meals independently. Cousin said: "This is only modern! Four generations having meals together is too much like what happened during the age of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*."

Two days after this split, things were again not working. Grandpa was in Cousin's group. "They, taking advantage of Grandpa's seniority and prestige, always occupied the stove, and the rest could only bemoan their helplessness." Giving each group a stove was not feasible, as fuel was rationed by the state and not to be increased. Besides, it now took only nine days to finish one cylinder of gas which used to last at least 25 days. "Everybody was panicking and sighing." "They had neither the nerve nor the heart to bother Grandpa again, so they all went to Cousin's Husband as if by prior agreement." Cousin's Husband was the only one in the family who had drunk foreign water. At this point, he "opened his heart and showed the real stuff." He said: "In my opinion, the fundamental question in our family is one of the system.... The question is who is the one to decide, and through what procedures is this person to make decisions, the content of meals. Should it be a feudal patriarchal system? Pecking order by seniority? Anarchism? Following caprice, that is, eating whatever one feels like making? ...The crux of the matter is democracy. Without democracy, one does not feel well even if one eats well...." Everybody "suddenly felt enlightened and kept nodding wisely." He continued: "A pecking order by seniority is, after all, a workable order in a backwater agrarian society. This order is especially suitable for illiterates and idiots.... It smothers competition, ...suppresses new rising forces." Modestly, I asked him: "What should we do, then?" He said: "To carry forward democracy: Elections! Democratic elections, this is the key.... Let's have an election campaign!" Father took a stand, saying: "Okay, I agree. But we have two gates to go through: One is Grandpa, to see whether or not he agrees, and the other is Sister Xu...." After

discussion, they decided that Grandpa "had the newest mind" and had long been fed up with taking charge of meals. The trouble would be with Sister Xu. Although she did not belong to this family, "there was absolutely nothing we could do if she was not convinced by any of our plans." They were all at the end of their rope. A few days later, "Uncle stood up and said that the two gates are actually one. Stubborn as Sister Xu is, she listens to Grandpa on every matter. If Grandpa agrees, she will agree too." Everybody saw the light all of a sudden and made Father and Uncle their representatives. Sure enough, the plan got through after initial negotiations. Then by general acclaim, they recommended Cousin's Husband to chair the democratic election.

Election day came at last in a sparkling festive atmosphere. Cousin's Husband first asked each candidate to deliver a speech under the title "How I Will Run the House." Unexpectedly, however, "there was no response and silence prevailed." Even Cousin's Husband himself played no part in the election campaign. Therefore, "we all, disheartened, gazed at each other in speechless despair and thought to ourselves, as if by prior agreement: Isn't it the idea of a good-for-nothing to have an election campaign in order to have someone take care of our household affairs? Boasting about oneself, as if peddling quack medicine, disregarding seniors and superiors, and offending the neighbors. There's no way that we will fall into such a trap!" Nevertheless, "after all, one has to have some democracy and an election since they had been planned." The election thus went ahead. Five blank ballots were collected from the 11 distributed, while two votes went to Sister Xu, three to Grandpa, and one to Son. Cousin said that since Grandpa received the most votes, he should naturally be the one. But "Grandpa did not consent. He said the question of making meals is actually a technical issue, not an ideological or conceptual issue.... Therefore, we should not be electing a leader, but selecting the best cook." Son hailed this remark and "everybody else also felt a substantial new line of thinking and that there was a new breakthrough."

After 30 days and 30 evenings of study and discussion, until the whole family was "unable to breathe or pass water or walk because of extreme fatigue," they decided on an appraisal and selection procedure. "Finally, at long last, a conclusion was reached on the appraisal of culinary art." The result was, "with everybody convinced": Grandpa and Grandma were rated Class One, Grade One; Father, Mother, Uncle, and Auntie were rated Class Two, Grade One; I, Wife, Cousin, and Cousin's Husband were rated Class One, Grade Two; and Son alone was rated Class One, Grade Three. Son also got a "Special Honorary Star of Hope [indicating promise for the future] Prize." But this did not add anything to his Grade Three status. "In a word, theories, terms, and methods are frequently renewed, but the order is eternal."

"Many days went by. Vaguely, people became aware that since the order is eternal, the research, discussion, and experimentation on theories, terms, and methods would naturally cool down. Making and eating meals ceased to be a cause of disputes and excitement. We now ceased to be bothered on whether making and eating meals was a technical issue, a systems issue, a cultural issue, a problem concerning concepts, or something that nobody had ever thought of before."

Sister Xu passed away, without illness; Son joined a Sino-foreign joint venture; Uncle and Auntie moved into an apartment; Cousin's Husband went abroad to pursue further studies, and later took Cousin abroad as well. What they want to eat or what they often eat is still gruel and pickled vegetables. I live with Father and Grandpa. The consumption of chicken, duck, fish, meat, eggs, milk, sugar, and oil has been increasing, but "gruel and pickled vegetables are still unalienable key components of our diet, and the rest is only supplementary." "Before each meal, Mother, as usual, would ask Grandpa and Grandma: 'What about soup? Shall I make one? No? What about the meat? In threads or in slices?' ...her tone being tactful and pleasant. And Grandpa's tone? It is kindly but forceful. Even if he says 'don't ask me' in reply, it is nevertheless still an answer." When the meal is ready, everybody is summoned to eat. Mother, on tenterhooks, will "try to feel [chuai mo 2260 2307]" (as written in the original, though it should be "try to figure out [chuai mo 2260 2302]") Grandpa's facial expression....

III. How To Look at and Appraise "Hard Thin Gruel"

Comrade Wang Meng wrote a preface for the English and German editions of his works, which was published by RENMIN WENXUE [PEOPLE'S LITERATURE] in its 1989 No. 5 issue under the title of "The Forgotten Charm." Some remarks in this article merit our attention. He said: "Now I am still writing, for the free galloping of the soul... also to make those commentators unable to catch up—always making contradictory judgments afterward... One of my novels is named after a butterfly. I feel proud of myself, because as a novelist, I am just like a big butterfly. When you cover my head with something, you still cannot cover my waist. When you catch my legs, you still cannot catch my wings. You will never understand who Wang Meng is, as clearly as myself." If that were the case, it would be a tragedy for literary commentators. But sometimes, he did have some reason to feel "proud" of himself. For example, in the 1991 No. 7 issue of XIAOSHUO YUEBAO, a commentator wrote: "Wang Meng's 'Hard Thin Gruel' can be called psychological fiction or a fable, but in narrative method, it is an out-and-out realistic short story. The author depicts the disturbances arising from the reform of breakfast in a family... The attitude toward 'thin gruel' can be regarded as an attitude toward all kinds of people in society. After reading it, the reader may draw different conclusions from different angles. He may understand it as a criticism of the all-round Westernization viewpoint,

as an understanding or comprehension of those who keep to the old standards, or as an apprehensiveness toward the hardships in China's transformation... The reason we say it is a fable is that there is little change or development in the personalities of the various characters in this story, and their images are not perfect and complete. They are more like symbols and marks..." Such comments are indeed full of "contradictory judgments." There is a mixture of psychological attitude, fable, and realism, and a mixture of criticism of all-round Westernization, understanding or comprehension of those who keep to the old standards, and apprehensiveness toward the hardships in transformation. It is true that when the head is covered by something, it is hard to cover the waist, and when the legs are caught, it is hard to catch the wings. But what on earth is the "Hard Thin Gruel"? It still remains a question. Naturally, the "big butterfly" has every reason to feel proud.

However, if one says that a big butterfly cannot be caught because it is too big, one is just saying something foolish. Therefore, it is possible for us to correctly understand, appraise, and comment on the short story "Hard Thin Gruel." Of course, to this end, we must make a realistic and concrete analysis of the story and endeavor to use the Marxist stand, viewpoint, and method to make scientific, or relatively scientific, judgments in light of the literary characteristics. This will eventually be achieved through contention and consultation in commentary circles.

In other words, studying and finding a way to understand the characters in the story and their special characteristics is the foundation for our comments. Then what is this story all about? The above-mentioned commentator said: "The author depicts the disturbances arising from the reform of breakfast in a family." Shen Ping summed it up as: "It depicts a big family in which four generations are living under the same roof. They are carrying out 'reform' of the 'family affairs' structure and promoting 'food reform.' In fact, it is just a matter of varying the breakfast of 'thin gruel and pickles.'" Of course, these remarks are not complete. The following explanation should be added: The "reform" finally ends in failure and all of the family members have become indifferent toward it because they find that they have been fooled. The characters, plot, and theme of the story develop along this course, and its imagery and ideological content are also displayed in this course.

Thus, we can see that "Hard Thin Gruel" has three ideological and artistic characteristics. First, there is a strong contrast between the theme and the subject matter. The materials used by the author are just ordinary and trivial things such as varying breakfast in a family, gruel, and pickles, which are easy and trivial matters. They cannot make people "unable to breathe or pass water or walk." However, in an attempt to control the "new tide and new trend," the author purposely stirs up "waves in a cup" and refers to all those tiny things as "structural reform," which has something to do with

"power" and "order." The theme seems too big, too mysterious, and too heavy. Because of this big contrast, the more serious the theme is, the more ridiculous the story becomes. All these form a bitter irony and burning satire on the "reform."

Second, there is the contrast and coordination between the family farce and the tragedy of "reform." In this short story, the "reform of family affairs" is described entirely as farce and tragedy. Originally, "outs had always been a steady life, of unity," but after "reform" began, the entire family could not get along peacefully. To enhance the effect of the farce and tragedy, the author does his utmost to exaggerate certain matters. For example, the so-called matter of having bread and milk is originally nothing profound. But after it is included in the "reform," the author tries to make it as tragic and farcical as possible. He writes: "The following day, after great effort, Son finally prepared butter bread tender omelet milk coffee [no punctuation as published] for breakfast. Sister Xu and Grandma did not drink milk or coffee. Uncle told them to fry some onions, Chinese prickly ash, Chinese cinnamon, herbs, sliced ginger, white pepper, laver, and dry red pepper in hot oil for a little while, and then add Guangdong-style soy sauce to it. Then, put this mixed gravy into the milk and coffee to reduce the Western stinking smell. I had a taste of it and found it was really acceptable. I also wanted to add some gravy. But when I found that Son was glaring at me with fierce eyes, like those of a murderer, I gave up wanting that taste and forced myself to take the stinking Western hot drink." After having bread and milk for breakfast for three days, serious disasters occurred: "Sister Xu was suffering from gastroenteritis poisoning. She was taken to a hospital, and the doctors suspected that she was also suffering from gastric cancer. Grandma was suffering from neurotic liver cirrhosis, which belonged to neither Category A nor Category B. After starting to take Western food, Grandpa had been suffering from constipation. Father and Uncle were looking after him in turn. They used bamboo chopsticks to help him but had very little success. Cousin suffered great pain from intestinal obstruction and received emergency surgery. Cousin's Husband suffered from serious toothaches and there were ulcers at both corners of his mouth. Wife often threw up after meals..." Sometimes, the author adds some comic material to the family farce to enhance its tragic effect through contrast. For example, when writing about the election, he creates a "festive atmosphere" at first: "They did general cleaning. Windows were cleaned, posters and paintings were put up, and new plastic and silk flowers were put in the vases... Cousin's Husband put on the gray Western coat which he wore during his visit to Europe and the United States, together with a black bow tie, looking like the conductor of a symphony orchestra. He would preside over that magnificent ceremony." However, after the election started, "there was no response. It was so quiet that one could even hear the flies buzzing in the kitchen." All felt "disheartened." Without prior consultation, they were all thinking: "What the hell is this democratic election all

about! For decades without democratic election, we had our gruel, pickles, and fried bean sauce noodles all right! For decades without democratic elections, we did not starve to death, eat ourselves to death, munch bricks, drink dog pee, get noodles in our nostrils or ass holes, or anything like that. Democracy—the idea of a good-for-nothing! Everybody will end up dead from loose bowels or hunger! This is what Chinese people are all about: They never leave themselves in peace until they become dropsical from self-torture.” The essence of this “reform of family affairs,” which is characterized by disorder and “self-torture,” is thus made clearer by exaggeration, mixed with farce and tragedy.

Third, symbolization of character, stylization of plot, and politicization of theme endow the work with strong political sense. The above-mentioned commentator said that in “Hard Thin Gruel,” “there is little change or development in the personalities of the characters, whose images are not complete and perfect.” In fact, this is acceptable for most short stories. It is also a characteristic of short stories. But this will not necessarily bring about symbolization of character. The surface reason for symbolization of character in this story is to make the characters abstract. But a deeper reason is to use the images to explain the political theme. Obviously, the various characters in the story are created according to certain concepts, and they represent and symbolize certain people. For example, the ages of the 11 family members “were in an ideal ladder structure: 88, 84, 63, 64, 61, 57, 40, 40... and 16.” Two old people are above 80, four are about 60, and there is no one between 20 and 30. But according to the story, “this ladder structure was an ideal one.” Why does the author say that it is an “ideal” structure? At the very beginning, the author throws this question to his reader, with bitter irony. The informal family member, Sister Xu, “had been taking care of our household affairs for 40 years.” In the story, Sister Xu is repeatedly connected with 40 years. It is said: “In our family, the meals have never been changed for 40 years.” “You have been cooking in our family for 40 years. Your achievements are the main aspect. No one can deny it.” The reader will naturally regard Sister Xu as the symbol of a particular 40 years. Except for Sister Xu, who has a surname, other characters in this story are only referred to according to their positions in the family hierarchy. We do not know what they wear or what their hobbies, habits, or personalities are. They are there only to fill those positions. They are no more than the symbols of those positions. Indeed, such characters do not have any vitality. They are abstract souls created by the author according to certain concepts and bodies dispatched willfully by the author. That is why the characters do not really act and cannot form real plots in the story. They can do nothing but obey the author. When told to hold a meeting, they hold a meeting; when told to argue, they argue; when told to be sick, they are all sick; and when told to be disheartened, they are disheartened. Entirely following the author’s arrangements and patterns, they blindly cherish hopes, torture themselves, raise a hue and cry, create disturbances, and then suffer

defeat and come to a tragic end. They repeat and repeat and finally become quiet and lead a “happy” life as before. It seems there are many people and complicated plots in this story, but actually they are all touched on lightly. Prominence is only given to the “freely galloping soul” of the author, in a hurdle and cross-country political race which is full of satire and criticism. Shen Ping said that for small matters such as “gruel and pickles,” the story “uses all kinds of big political phrases and words.” This is true. It is by no means a “fabrication” or a “rumor.” In fact, the phrases used in the story, such as “head-of-state system,” “cabinet system,” “right persons for the cabinet,” “nonvoting delegates,” “rule in turn,” “food reform,” “the great cause of cooking,” “having both position and power,” “power means corruption,” and so forth, are all big political phrases unsuitable for “gruel and pickles.” Moreover, in this story we can see everywhere short and concentrated, or long and extensive, political comments. The comments made by Cousin’s Husband on structure and democracy are a typical example. Another example is: When Grandpa wins only three votes during the election, which is less than half, or one-third, of the votes, “Cousin said that since Grandpa had won the most votes, he should naturally be elected. This was, by no means, a feudal patriarchal ideology, but a modern concept of democracy. Cousin continued: In our family, the feudal patriarchal ideology no longer exists. It is not the main danger, or the primary contradiction. What we should maintain vigilance against are anarchism under the pretext of opposing feudalism, liberalism, self-centeredness, solipsism, the doctrine of unduly high levels of spending, hedonism, the doctrine advocating that the moon over the United States is rounder than that over China, and Western-style dogmatism.” In the circumstances of the story, Cousin’s political comments undoubtedly become the target of criticism and exposure, which are aimed at giving prominence to the political theme of the story. Another passage of political comment is: “Theories and methods are often changed, but the order is eternal.” “Since the order is eternal, discussion and experiment on theories and methods will naturally lower their temperature.” This is the main idea of the story. We may say that the whole story is derived and developed from this idea.

Judging from the above-mentioned three characteristics, we have every reason to say that “Hard Thin Gruel” is a satirical political story depicting the course of a “reform of family affairs,” from rise to failure. Why then was “reform” so unsuccessful that it was even unable to “reform” the breakfast of “gruel and pickles,” and finally ended in failure? According to the story, the problem lay mainly with Grandpa, who was the initiator and propeller of the “reform.” Forced by the constantly emerging new trends and new styles, he started the “reform” to suit the new situation and absorbed some new concepts and phrases from newspapers and broadcasts. The “reform” he pushed forward was no more than a “food reform.” In fact, he “had no prejudice” toward “what to eat, how to eat, and other related

matters." Therefore, when Son failed in his Western food reform, he "went to see Father and Uncle." "Father and Uncle could do nothing but ask instructions from Grandpa, and the latter went to see Sister Xu." But Sister Xu was in the hospital and could not help. Grandpa returned and said: "As you came to ask me for help, I went to see Sister Xu. But she had been discouraged by your complaints. In addition, after taking the Western meal prepared by Grandchildren, she was suffering intestinal and stomach disorders. Thus, I am unable to manage such affairs. Anyone can eat whatever he likes. I would rather die if I have nothing to eat." Grandpa was so incompetent, but he still did not want to "give up his power" and was still exercising control over the current "reform." "Nominated by Grandpa," Father was in charge of family affairs. Also urged by him, Father delegated his power to Sister Xu. Approved by Grandpa, Son began to prepare Western food. Having meals separately was caused by the same old man. Later, when the election campaign suffered setbacks, the mess was cleared up and new trains of thought were found also by Grandpa. Therefore, he was unable to lay the blame on others when failure occurred in the "reform," which was conducted by him directly or behind the scenes and in which theories and methods were often changed but the order was eternal. How could such a Grandpa always be in the "power" center? The problem lay with the family, in which four generations of people were living under the same roof and the hierarchical system was practiced. The problem lay in the feudal patriarchal system and ideology. Because a pecking order by seniority had been established in this family, Grandpa was always in the position of a feudal patriarch. On the other hand, in his position, Grandpa was trying to maintain the pecking order of the family. Thus, this order became the main target of criticism in this story. Cousin's Husband, a "real talent" who "enlightened" everyone, said: "Order by seniority is, after all, order for a stagnant agrarian society, especially suitable for illiterates and idiots. Even those who are congenitally retarded can understand and accept this inflexible and unchangeable, or, I would say, this rigid order." As a matter of fact, most of the people appearing in this story are "illiterates," "idiots," and "congenitally retarded people." Having brought a tape recorder home, they "emulated the mewing of a cat," recorded it, and played it back to amuse everyone. Cousin's Husband also said: The pecking order by seniority "has strangled competition, together with man's initiative, creativity, and variability. Without variation, there would be no human beings. Without variation, we would still be monkeys. Moreover, the newly emerging forces are also suppressed by this order. Men are most energetic, most active in thinking, and most enthusiastic in pursuing ideals before the age of 40. In this period, however, they are pushed down and oppressed at the bottom..." Son sighed: "That is absolutely right!" He was so excited that his eyes were filled with tears. Then came the election. The Son also won a vote, which was really valuable. It made him able to "shout," "saying that the fact he had won a vote showed that people's will had not died and the flames had not

been stamped out. Instead they would be raging more fiercely." He also said: "Although there is order in our family, there is no love. Order without love is just like marriage without love. It is immoral." Eventually, the names in the order of the results of the cooking contest made them understand that "reform" was nothing but a kind of torture and hoodwinking. Thereupon, the "reform" ended.

We have now finished our examination of this novel. How, then, should we assess it? Should we merely regard it as a form of experiment? Or a recreational work? Or a dream of the writer? Or a relieving of the bowels after holding back for some time? Perhaps "these questions are all reasonable, but also not satisfactory." If explanations are given in light of these formulations, "you will never know who Wang Meng is." Nevertheless, Comrade Wang Meng has pointed out where we have gone astray from the right path. He delivered a speech entitled "Show Concern for Reform and Literature" at the opening ceremony of the Third Session of the Fourth Council of the Chinese Writers' Association. In the speech, carried in WENYI BAO on 26 November 1988, he said: "It does not matter whether our works are directly related to reform. Perhaps the themes of our works have nothing to do with reform. Fairy tales, love poems, and historical novels cannot in the slightest degree rule out our real attitude toward the ongoing reform, which will influence social public opinion through our works or other channels." I very much agree with Comrade Wang Meng. Of course we are justified in applying this opinion to examine the real attitude of the writer toward reform as reflected in "Hard Thin Gruel" and the influence of this novel on social public opinion.

In other words, the author wants to give us some opinions on reform through "Hard Thin Gruel," that is, there is a "reform" in the novel which causes suffering, fools others, and should be mocked and criticized. It does not merit any attention and is doomed to failure. Although the "reform" is fictitious, it has certain connections and relations with actual reform. What, then, are the connections and relations? Fundamentally speaking, literature is the reflection of life. Naturally, such reflection is dynamic and not negative. It includes the author's appraisal of life as well as certain artistic exaggerations or changes. Moreover, a satirical novel has its unique features in reflecting life. Its artistic exaggeration or changes are stronger, usually constituting or applying symbolism, metaphor, simile, insinuation, and other artistic means. Furthermore, a satirical novel of a particular writer also has its unique features, which are specifically manifested in the writer's unique artistic method and style, as well as in the special connections and relations between the writer's artistic creation and real life. When analyzing the connections and relations between a satirical novel of a particular writer and real life, we can usually gain important enlightenment from the features of his similar satirical novels. Hence, Comrade Wang Meng's remarks can serve as our key to understanding the connections between "Hard Thin

Gruel" and real life. In his "Reading Notes on Theory, Life, and Discipline Research," (DUSHU [READING], Nos. 11 and 12, 1986), Wang said: "A few years ago, I wrote a short novel on a soft drinks production conference held in a certain locality. Those attending were talking about improving the production and supply of beer, soda, plum juice, and fruit juice. At that moment, an elderly man spoke out sternly: The source and essence of all beverages and the most important and popular drink of all beverages is water. Without water, discussion of beer and fruit juice will deviate from the general orientation, go astray, and barter the trunk for the branches. The novel is full of preposterous remarks and bitter tears. The short novel seemed 'absurd,' but it was the unchanged epitome of the controversies in academic and theoretical circles for a period of time in the past." He frankly disclosed the most important creation pattern in his satirical novels. As a matter of fact, "Hard Thin Gruel" is precisely this kind of novel, which "seems absurd, but is the unchanged epitome of a period in the past." In short, its relation with reality is a kind of "epitome" relationship. Although it "seems absurd" in writing, and contains "preposterous remarks and bitter tears," in essence it reflects, "epitomizes," "criticizes, and mocks reality. This is the real, profound reason why the critic regarded "Hard Thin Gruel" as "an out-and-out realistic novel" and "psychological novel," believing that "the attitudes toward 'thin gruel' portrayed the psychology of all kinds of people in society at that time." Thus it can be seen that the "reform" invented, criticized, and mocked in "Hard Thin Gruel" is used to "epitomize" the real reform of "a period in the past." It is the "epitome" of the real reform of "a period in the past." In other words, "Hard Thin Gruel" regards the real reform of "a period in the past" as farce, tragedy, and distress." Undoubtedly, this is a great distortion of reform. For this reason, Comrade Shen Ping said in criticism: "In light of the implied meaning of the novel, it is not merely talking about the 'difficulties in China's transformation,' but saying that there is no hope for China's reform and that even 'reform' of a breakfast of 'gruel and pickles' is impossible." It should be noted that the criticism is pertinent and accords with the basic attitude of the novel toward reform of "a period in the past."

We can also say that the novel calls for and supports certain "reforms." Specifically speaking, it is against the so-called "study and practice of theoretical terms" of "a certain period in the past," regards it as "renewing the theoretical terms while keeping the order unchanged" and as a reform which causes "suffering." However, it supports and calls for a "reform" of the "conservation order," namely, a "reform" of the "inflexible," "static," "rigid," "loveless," and "immoral" order which "obeys the orders of the grandfather and keeps old practices unchanged for 40 years," which is "a feudal patriarchal system which arranges the ranks of the leadership on the basis of seniority," and which is a "stagnant agricultural society particularly suited to illiterates and idiots" and can be understood and accepted by the "congenitally

mentally retarded." To carry out the "reform" requested and supported by the novel, Grandpa must genuinely let the subordinates "have a free hand" rather than give the answer "don't ask me." At the same time, Sister Xu should also "step down from the stage of history of her own accord" and allow those who are "in their prime of life, active in thinking, and enthusiastic" to "develop democracy," "take part in competition," "engage in creation," "devote themselves," and "preside over the grand occasion"... Naturally, it is unnecessary to check one by one who "Grandpa" and others allude to, because the novel is allowed to have a vague nature, which covers more than precise description, so that it looks fuzzy but nothing is missing. In any case, the novel clearly shows its "real attitude toward the state's reform" and its influence on "social public opinion." Shen Ping points out that a tiny handful of people who clung to bourgeois liberalization advocated a fundamental reform of the system during the winter of 1988 and spring of 1989. The media in Taiwan and Hong Kong also clamored that "the veteran leaders should retire now." This was the "social public opinion" at that time, based on facts. It was not "fabricated" by Shen Ping. Regarding such "social public opinion," does not "Hard Thin Gruel" objectively support and echo that "public opinion," irrespective of the subjective desire of the writer?

It should be noted that writers are allowed to criticize the shortcomings or defects of reform. If they make mistakes in criticism, they can correct the mistakes through criticism and self-criticism and deepen their understanding. A work like "Hard Thin Gruel," which makes insinuations about and ridicules socialist reform, is not recommendable politically. In consideration of the complicated reasons leading to these mistakes, the literature and art criticism circles have taken a magnanimous attitude toward the novel, expecting the author to draw a lesson and deepen understanding by himself. Under such circumstances, however, XIAOSHUO YUEBAO awarded the novel. Is this not "harmful to the writer" as Comrade Shen Ping said? When Shen Ping's letter was published in WENYI BAO, the author charged WENYI BAO and Shen Ping with being "lawless elements" and accused them of practicing "political libel." It is indeed distressing to see such a "famous writer" lacking the spirit of self-criticism and glossing over his faults in the face of iron facts and on the major principle issues. People who care for writers and literature will not like to see this happen. However, when things have developed to such a state, it is necessary to earnestly resort to normal literary and artistic criticism, and organize related personalities to frankly exchange views, and negotiate with our "renowned writer" to seek common understanding on the issue of XIAOSHUO YUEBAO conferring a prize on the novel "Hard Thin Gruel." At the same time, I would like to solemnly make the following statement: As a piece of literary and artistic criticism, this article is simply an individual's view, and counter-criticism is welcomed. Here, "a remarkable work should be shared and its subtleties discussed." I hope readers will join in the discussion to push forward the prosperity and development of socialist literature and art with our joint efforts.

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