

Absent or Ambivalent Mothers and Avoidant Children – An Evolutionary Reading of Zhang Kangkang’s Motherhood Stories

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Abstract

This evolutionary reading of the Chinese writer Zhang Kangkang’s maternal stories explores the specificities and agency of mothers and of children. The dilemma confronted by physically absent and/or emotionally detached mothers, depicted in Zhang’s stories, entails women’s strategic intelligence to make tradeoffs between their reproductive efforts and their life stage and conditions. It sheds light on conditional maternal commitment, the necessity and feasibility of cooperative childrearing, and various mother–child conflicts.

Zhang’s texts also describe insecurely attached infants and children who sink into a nonchalant and avoidant state after experiencing distress, terror, or resentment due to insensitive and unpredictable mothering. Absent and ambivalent mothers are generally harassed by the feeling of guilt, resulting from conditional maternal commitment, mother-child conflicts, and the high expectations of the motherhood myth. Children’s counterstrategies also regulate and enhance maternal or alloparental care.

Key words: Zhang Kangkang, China, cooperative breeding, maternal guilt, mother-child conflict, motherhood myth, reproductive strategies, child strategies

Introduction

In her review article, Samira Kawash (2011, 990, 996; see also Ross 1995) points out that motherhood studies have been “fragmented and discontinuous”, and that, although Sarah Hrdy’s work (1999b) is “a valuable corrective for anyone who would confuse the existence of a particular maternal behaviour with the natural essence of maternity,” it “has had approximately zero impact on feminist studies of motherhood.” This paper is an attempt to fill this lacuna, employing the findings and arguments by evolutionarily oriented scholars, especially Sarah Hrdy, to analyze the maternal stories written by Zhang Kangkang (1950–), a contemporary Chinese female writer. The English translation of Zhang’s novel *The Invisible Companion* by Daniel Bryant is used for reference in this paper. Other translations of Zhang’s texts are mine.

This interdisciplinary research attempts to alleviate some of the in my opinion unnecessary feminist worries about essentialism or biological reductionism when

approaching motherhood from an evolutionary perspective. Instead, I will illustrate how an evolutionary perspective may be used to explore the specificities, subjectivity, and agency of mothers and of children as well.

Hrdy (1994, 1999a, 1999b, 2001, 2009) proves that a mother's commitment to her offspring is contingent on circumstances and complicated by a range of considerations including the costs and benefits of raising a child, socioeconomic constraints, maternal age and condition, availability of alloparental support, and the infant's sex and viability. The term "alloparenting", in biology and sociology refers to a system of parenting where individuals other than the actual parents act in a parental role. Firstly, the task of rearing slow-maturing and altricial human infants is costly, demanding, prolonged, and often tedious. Secondly, engaging in both reproductive and productive undertakings, mothers can hardly be present full-time. Thus extensive and intensive maternal investment has to be supplemented by help from one or more alloparents. While "mothers matter most" for child development (Campbell 2002, 34), mothers are seldom the sole caretakers of their children. A supportive kin and alloparental network, along with well-established child-rearing social systems, make cooperative child-rearing feasible. Zhang herself and the mothers in her stories have left their children with others (often the grandparents) for extended periods of time in order to work and fulfil their aspirations without encumbrance.

Motherhood is not a myth, nor exclusively a cultural construct. I will attempt to show how, instead of serving the mainstream views on how maternal responses are exclusively socially constructed, both Hrdy's historical, ethnographic, and demographic case studies and Zhang's literary stories provide insights into the innate mechanisms involved in women's reproductive calculations that have evolved across a vast span of time and across cultures (Hrdy 2001, 66). Mothers respond to their offspring in variable circumstances with variable levels of maternal commitment. But in the way that mothers optimize maternal care resources to combine and balance production and reproduction, maternal reactions remain generally consistent, even when maternity was ideologically disregarded during the Mao years in China.

Materials and method

My principle object or the method employed in this article is to apply evolutionary theory to Zhang's literary texts, with reservations, as the complexity of the relation between the real world and the fictional world should not be reduced and simplified. While using evolutionary principles to interpret literary texts is illuminating, this Darwinian literary approach of mine can be problematic on many grounds. Firstly, the application of evolutionary theory on human behaviour about real people to novelistic texts about imaginative approximations of real people is still debatable (see, for example, Kramnick 2011); secondly, this research only engages in a single authorship instead of a vast literary corpus.

Zhang's writings on motherhood include novels, *The Invisible Companion* (1986), *The Gallery of Love* (1996), and *Women on the Edge* (2006), novellas, *The Colourful Disk* (1995), *An Hourly Worker* (1997), and *Zhima* (2003), and some of her essays about her own maternal experiences. Limited or anecdotal as they can be in revealing human motherhood in reality, these literary texts by Zhang, in a certain representative way, depict the dilemma confronted by physically absent and/or emotionally ambivalent mothers, their strategies and tradeoffs, various mother-child conflicts, the ill consequences of insensitive and unpredictable mothering, maternal guilt, and young children's counterstrategies to negotiate their survival and well-being. Mothers and children in Zhang's texts behave in seemingly contradictory manners. The inconsistency suggested by their behavioural diversity is a paradox that can be resolved when viewed through an evolutionary lens.

Theoretical framework: mothers, alloparents and attachment patterns

In a review of which kin has supported children's survival in different societies, Sear and Mace (2008) find that potential conflicts between caregivers can lower the quantity and quality of childcare, and that allocarers "differ in whether they are consistently beneficial to children or not." Fathers' investment in young children is facultative and not obligatory, which means that it varies greatly in different households and societies. Grandmothers, owing to their genetic relatedness and postreproductive, postmenopausal status, tend to devote themselves to caring for their grandchildren (Hrdy 1999b, 273). Yet in Zhang's texts and in general, there is a persistent contrast between maternal and paternal grandmothers – the former incline to be affectionate and altruistic, and the latter callous, manipulative, and much less reliable. Genetic relatedness alone is an unreliable predictor of maternal, paternal, and alloparental commitment to children. It is rather the frequent proximity to the children and caregivers' benign disposition that elicit and maintain nurturing behaviours and emotions.

Cooperative breeding entails care negotiation and cooperation for children's wellbeing, yet it makes mother-offspring conflicts conspicuous. Infants "have an innate need for a primary attachment figure in the first years of life, a role that mothers are uniquely qualified to fill, and that human babies deprived of such attachments suffer irreparable damage" (Hrdy 1999a, 24).

The importance of this primary attachment is familiar from Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment. Attachment theory is useful in understanding that earlier experiences with inconsistent mothering can convey a long-lasting negative message to the child and lead to insecure attachment relationships (Belsky, Steinberg, and Draper 1991, 653; Belsky, Fish, and Isabella 1991; Belsky et al. 2007). Two categories of insecurely attached children have been identified (Hrdy 1999b, 402). The first are "insecure and

ambivalent” about their relationship to their mothers/caregivers. These children focus on their mothers/caregivers but seem hesitant to trust them. The second are the “insecurely and avoidantly attached” children, who sink into a nonchalant and avoidant state after experiencing distress, anxiety, terror, rage or desolation due to their mothers’ disappearance. Researchers also differentiate four types of insecure attachment styles that people may have when parenting and early relationships have not developed well: anxious/preoccupied attachments, anxious/ambivalent attachments, avoidance/dismissing attachments, and avoidant/fearful attachments (see Worden 2009, 68–70). While ambivalent attachment is “an adaptive response to parental *inability* to provide quality caregiving,” avoidant attachment is “an adaptive response to parental *unwillingness* to do so” (Kirkpatrick 2005, 192, italics in original). Zhang’s novels and essays especially depict these young avoidant attached children including her own son.

Absent and ambivalent mothers, including Zhang herself, are generally harassed by the feeling of guilt, resulting from conditional maternal investment, various parent-offspring conflicts, and the assumptions of the motherhood myth. Maternal guilt has an adaptive value as it functions as a regulator promoting mothers’ investment in children (Rotkirch and Janhunen 2009, 93). So do infants’ and children’s counter strategies. Appearing nonchalant and avoidant, and being self-centered and manipulative, as described in Zhang’s texts, can be two adaptive strategies to protest and reproach a mother’s disengagement, and evoke and deepen her feeling of guilt.

Conditional maternal commitment

There are two continuums of maternal responsiveness: in emotions, and in practical calculations and actual behaviours. In maternal affective responses to children, the continuum begins from intense attachment to a child, goes through feelings of indifference, intolerance, estrangement, and neglect, and ends with overt hostility toward a child. The continuum of actual behaviours ranges from terminating investment (such as infanticide and abortion) and abandoning children at one extreme to total maternal self-sacrifice at the other; in between lie various strategies and compromises that can reduce the immediate costs or overall outlays of parental efforts (Hrdy 1994, 6–9). In both these continuums, maternal responses are discriminatory, selective, and situation-dependent. Contrasting sharply with the motherhood myth, which depicts all mothers as constantly present and wholeheartedly devoted, “[l]ess-than-fully-committed mothers and mothers who delegate care to others” fall within the spectrums of the two continuums, and are common and normal, if not pathological (Hrdy 1999b, 519).

Deteriorating social and economic conditions are, first of all, the predictors that foresee Xiao Xiao’s retrenchment of maternal solicitude in Zhang’s novel, *The Invisible Companion*. The novel is not autobiographical, but the outline of the story basically corresponds to Zhang’s own life experiences: A nineteen-year-old girl is dispatched to

the Great Northern Wilderness during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in China, gets married with an urban youth who is also from her hometown of Hangzhou in southern China, bears a child two years later, and soon divorces. She sends the one-month-old infant away to the paternal grandparents in the south. In Zhang's novelistic writings on maternity, it is easy to discern her own personal life stories. Some of her essays also directly recount her real-life experiences about her son's growing-up and the difficult mother-son relationship.

During the Cultural Revolution in China, the number of dispossessed and displaced people swelled. A proliferation of people precipitated into dislocation and destitution. Posited in the extremely tough environment in the north during the Cultural Revolution, the twenty-one-year-old novice mother Xiao Xiao seems to have no other option. The young couple finds it difficult even to provide themselves with the bare necessities. The arrival of a child can only reduce the family to begging. They have to make compromises between their own subsistence needs and the time, energy, and resources required for rearing a child. The scarcity of resources and unavailability of alloparental help exacerbate the young couple's parental solicitude. Xiao Xiao, as other mothers would do, elects to delegate the care of her infant to others.

The task of combining survival, work, and reproduction in an almost irreconcilable predicament also confronts migrant working mothers in post-Mao China such as Zhima in Zhang's novella *Zhima* and Laidi in *An Hourly Worker*. The increasing mobility of the labour force means that these rural women go far away from home, leaving their supportive kin network. Children are either left behind (often with grandmothers) or moved into the cities. In the latter solution, alloparents move as well so that the mothers are free to go off to work as home servants or nursemaids. The three generations crowd into the squalid urban shantytowns with their glimmer of economic opportunity, cherishing the prospect of a decent future for the children. Mothers like Zhima and Laidi, even if they want to, do not have the option of staying at home and caring for their children. Maternal caregiving task is and has to be delegated in order for the mothers themselves to survive and keep their children alive and prosperous. Laidi's mother-in-law forces her to go to work by beating and scolding her. Pressure on women's "resource value" in addition to their reproductive value makes women feel the need to actively participate in socioeconomic life (Low 2005, 66). Without Laidi's hourly labour, her and her husband's survival, as well as the children's tuition fees, would be problematic. Without Zhima's productive value, the family would perpetually struggle in insolvency and indigence.

But to combine productive and reproductive lives, these migrant mothers have to leave their children behind or send them away, tortured by the pangs of prolonged separation. Everything Zhima does in her host home reminds her of her children. Unable to see them even once in four years, Laidi cries their names in her dreams. Unlike Xiao

Xiao's temperance and aloofness, Laidi and Zhima indulge themselves in the release of maternal emotions. Years of separation are submerged by yearning tears.

Xiao Xiao's detachment, however, by no means testifies that her maternal responsiveness is "unnatural" or abnormal. She is hesitant to lavish her maternal emotions and mitigates her investment in the newborn also owing to her inclination to realize her ambitions and improve her own lot first, on top of her socioeconomic plight at the time of her childbirth. Women often opt for economic security and upward mobility ahead of having a child. The importance of such delay is especially critical for women with both ambitions and potentials. Xiao Xiao's baby is conceived due to an unplanned pregnancy. Noticing the pregnancy too late, she is unable to resort to induced abortion. Her behavioural and emotional reactions to this inopportune birth are understandable from the standpoint of a first-time mother who gives birth at a very young age, without any hands-on experiences of raising a child, under poor circumstances, with very little alloparental support around while preoccupied by her unfulfilled ambitions.

After delivery, the lag of the onset of lactation causes several days' struggling and despondence for both Xiao Xiao and her newborn. Xiao Xiao takes much effort to suckle the baby, hoping that her milk will be coming in soon and enduring the pain of a famished, exasperated baby's sucking. But from the first moment she scrutinizes her newborn, she already psychologically distances herself and her body responds with no milk supply. The baby's wizened and wrinkled face, timid and cautious whining, and listless expression in the eyes, all convey his lack of vigour and viability to her and further repel her. Zhang writes:

She turned away to avoid him [(her baby)], overcome by a sudden feeling almost of revulsion. ... It was not at all like in the stories, where the first sight of her child was supposed to fill her with the joy of motherhood. ... What she had instead was a feeling of alienation, of distance. (Zhang 1996a, 178)

What Xiao Xiao sees and why she feels her neonate to be repulsive can be understood as conditioned mostly by her circumstances and preferences. Her assessment of the baby's attributes can be read as based not only on his physical appearance and cries, but on her maternal calculations and the emotional ambivalence she feels about investing in him. She is not psychologically and financially ready to be a mother with long-term and heavy dedication to a child's wellbeing. Even the close physical contact with the baby after birth (actually a painful and discouraging experience) has failed to foster her maternal solicitude. The mental state of a mother confronting unfavourable circumstances and having agendas of her own is often anxiety and stressfulness, which can hardly transform a post-partum woman into a full-fledged lactating mother. Motherhood and lactation are periods associated with increased stress and increased stress reactivity, and "stressed mothers are more likely to find infant stimuli (e.g. cries) aversive" (Maestriperi 2011, 526). Xiao Xiao even feels frightened and awkward to hold the baby (Zhang 1996a, 186).

The poor inopportunist-born infant has to be appeased with sugar water and goat's milk, and succumbs to dysentery, before the consigned formula milk powder eventually arrives from his southern grandparents. After one month, the couple sends him away and Xiao Xiao never breastfeeds him again. Yet if breastfeeding is initiated, with the increasing physiological and emotional changes in the mother, the process of bonding with an infant may be facilitated and smoothed (Hrdy 1999b, 472). But wet-nursing and separation discontinue Xiao Xiao's further tactile and emotional experiences with the baby, and become the last straw that determines the failure of her maternal attachment. As Hrdy shows, there is not a single "critical period" after birth during which a human mother either once and for all bonds with her infant or not. The strong emotional tie has to be gradually formed and reinforced in prolonged exposure to and intimate interaction with a child. Six months later, when Xiao Xiao goes to see the baby, she rejoices that she has opted not to breastfeed and sent the baby away swiftly. Now no "maternal feeling" is induced by the forty-minute reunion; she is so "calm, as though she had visited a friend's baby" (Zhang 1996a, 279).

Less committed mothers were actually culturally entrenched during the Mao years in China when the myth of gender equality was ideologically propagated. Women were not supposed to exhibit their femininity and were allegedly equal to men in this "sexless" era, dressing, behaving, working, and even thinking all in the unified way, which was taken for granted to be male. In these years, "state pronouncements emphasized the obligation and opportunity of all women to contribute to society" and production, while at the same time being a housewife was not regarded "as a glorified revolutionary role," as Hershatter (2004, 1013) summarizes it. Maternity was subsequently devalued, shunned or spurned. Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz (1995, 52) points out one of the "serious drawbacks" egalitarian feminism entailed: "To achieve an equality between the sexes, women's specific needs and interests – what distinguishes them from men – must be minimized and their commonness or humanity stressed. ... This may ... explain the strong antipathy to maternity amongst a number of egalitarian feminists."

The myth of gender equality during the Cultural Revolution was forged partly through the image of "iron girls," women desexualized and masculinized. In Zhang's novel *The Invisible Companion*, Xiao Xiao's maternal nurturing responsiveness is greatly suppressed by the visit of an "iron girl," Guo Chunmei, who arrives at the Farm on the same train as Xiao Xiao but makes a meteoric rise in rank within two years. Guo's success becomes "a centrifugal force," dragging Xiao Xiao away from her family and maternity (Dai 2007, 145). Guo warns that Xiao Xiao has to catch up with the revolutionary trend and should never let motherhood hinder her. In the presence of Guo, Xiao Xiao cannot even pacify her crying baby by picking him up or changing his diaper. "Under Guo's watchful eyes, she felt like she was holding a red-hot coal" (Zhang 1996a, 190). After Guo's visit and cautionary remarks, the burning desire for better circumstances further pricks Xiao Xiao's ambitions and her undeveloped talent, and alienates her from her baby.

Stereotypically, women's motherhood is viewed as incompatible with their competitiveness and status striving. It seems that even Zhang tries to dampen women's desire for status improving and wealth gathering. Set as the antagonist to the story's heroin, Tao Tao in Zhang's novel *Women on the Edge* is obviously described as a pushy woman who struggles to change her situation and expends excessive attention and energy in seeking a prosperous and high-status husband. She works and studies industriously, and obsessively searches for and changes boyfriends. From being a lowly typist in a small remote northern town, then a household maid and waitress in Shenzhen, to becoming a competent manager in a Beijing bank, she pays out both physically and mentally. Pestered, beaten, and extorted by ex-mates, having unwanted children aborted repeatedly, and working and studying day and night, she exhausts both her bodily and sentimental resources.

Far from conflicting with maternity, however, Tao Tao's ambitious tendencies are inseparably linked with her reproductive interests. Zhang (2007b, 155–6) says that women's career and ambitions are a kite; no matter how high and freely it can fly, it is always connected with and controlled by her family and children on the other end of the string. As Tao Tao explains her departure to her hometown boyfriend, "I don't want my child to be a fisherman, digging holes on this desolate frozen river and smelling like coarse corns once s/he opens her/his mouth to speak." After losing her "best child" due to habitual abortion, she mourns, "Can a future mother's wise plan and calculations be called an ambition? If a woman undergoes and endures so much humiliation and hardship for her future child's happiness and bright prospects, she should be regarded as a good woman" (Zhang 2006b, 46, 332).

Both the mothers' genetic contribution (bodily resources) and non-genetic endowments (socioeconomic circumstances) have far-reaching consequences for children's survival and prosperity (Hrdy 1999b, 80). But the construction of an advantageous social niche for both themselves and their children takes time. This is why mothers have to adapt themselves to reproductive activities opportunely and prudently, and maternal commitment can flexibly change with maternal age and conditions. The same mother who seems indifferent to the plight of one child now can be profoundly nurturant to another one, born later when she is older and in more auspicious circumstances. Tao Tao, a woman who has unduly chosen abortion several times, desperately tries to retain her last residual reproductive value when she feels that her situation finally allows for maternity. Zhang in her real life, a mother who has reduced the toll of bringing up her infant in order to fulfil her aspiration and talent freely, invested heavily in him during later years, when she was better off.

Cooperative breeding systems

That human beings evolved as cooperative breeders has increasingly gained recognition recently. Mothers need to enlist alloparental care from fathers, siblings, other kin, or anyone else they can rely upon. As a consequence of this dependency, maternal commitment is contingent on both the mother's own circumstances and social circumstances: availability of support from the social microsystem (family, partner, parents, relatives) and from the social macrosystem (society, institutions) (Oliverio 1994, 118). Oftentimes mothers face the problem of the scarcity of motivated, reliable, and qualified alloparents or poor social arrangements that can barely accommodate the requirements of communal child-rearing. But if a mother is buttressed by sufficient alloparental help or a well-established communal child-rearing social system, even a very inopportunistly born child like Xiao Xiao's infant in Zhang's *The Invisible Companion* is wanted and cared for.

Xiao Xiao's story illustrates both the feasibility and necessity of cooperative breeding. Though Xiao Xiao psychologically distances herself from her newborn, her partner fervently adores him and is the primary caregiver. But having no mother's milk and no money to buy formula milk, the couple has to send the one-month-old infant to Xiao Xiao's parents-in-law in the south. The grandparents earnestly welcome and accept their grandson, and soon find a wet nurse for him. Zhang herself, in real life, has also benefited from paid wet-nursing and free "communal suckling" proffered by her mother's women friends when her mother was put into isolation under prolonged interrogation (Zhang 2009a, 92–3). Unlike mothers in the infamous "wet-nursing era," Xiao Xiao and Zhang's mother have no alternative but wet-nursing, compared with other more dismal choices and outcomes such as malnutrition or even death of the babies and worsened maternal economic destitution or political plight. As Xiao Xiao says, "Without the wet nurse, she and her boy would be at the end of hope" (Zhang 1996a, 206). But similar to the "wet-nursing era" mothers, Xiao Xiao delegates the care of her infant to a commercial wet nurse to reduce the immediate costs of parenting. Wet-nursing not only spares her from the drudgery of nursing her baby, but, most importantly, retains her labour and frees her for both subsistence-related and status-enhancing pursuits.

After Xiao Xiao's child is weaned, he is returned to his paternal grandparents and lives with them for a long period. When Laidi and Zhima are working in the city for years, their children are also taken care of by fathers and, mostly, grandmothers. Grandmothers generally are willing and feel obligated to devote themselves to the caretaking of their grandchildren, even though they are all not well-disposed towards the mothers – their daughters-in-law – in Zhang's stories. Sharing one-quarter of their genes with the child, grandmothers are in general motivated to help by the logic of kin altruism. Furthermore, grandmothers whose reproductive career has already ended are predisposed to assisting needy kin, since the benefits provided by her to kin presumably outweigh the costs the help imposes on her (1999b, 273).

Not all grandmothers, however, become altruistic alloparents. Zhang writes about the contrast between *waipo* (maternal grandmother) and *nainai* (paternal grandmother). Her own *waipo* adopted her mother from a foundling home, but treated her mother tenderly and affectionately no less than a biological mother. *Waipo* also dedicated herself to the care of her adoptee's children, namely, Zhang and her sister (Zhang 1996d, 200). On the contrary, Zhang's paternal grandmother, is described as being egotistic, spiteful, and callous towards her grandchildren. She refused to offer any alloparental help for her daughter-in-law, who was encumbered by two little children, even when Zhang's father, once a very helpful co-caregiver, was forced to work on a far-away work farm year after year, and her own family was wholly financially dependent on her daughter-in-law (Zhang 2009a, 197). In the novella *The Colourful Disk*, even if the paternal grandmother takes in the grandson Zhong Cong after his parents' divorce and offers significant care, Zhong Cong is being brought up in a rigid and crude way. If it were not for the maternal grandmother's frequent visits bringing love and warmth, Zhong Cong would have become dishonest and autistic.

The contrast between maternal and paternal grandmothers, especially Zhang's own adoptive *waipo* and biological *nainai*, makes Zhang (2009a, 233) write, "*Waipo*'s lifelong affection to me makes me intensely abhor the idea that only bloodline or kindred matters." It seems that, besides the frequent proximity to the child, the rough relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and individual grandmother's personality are significant factors in alloparental care arrangement and quality.

Xiao Xiao's maternal story in *The Invisible Companion*, Zhong Cong's bildungsroman in *The Colourful Disk*, and Zhang's own life experiences illustrate that alloparental nurturing behaviours and attached emotions differ in quantity and quality, and that children may manage by embedding themselves in supportive kin and an alloparental network even if they fail to form any attachment to their mothers. In *The Invisible Companion*, the infant who earlier suffers from starvation, infirmity, and disease is responsibly cared for and brought up despite the failed mother-infant attachment. The once reserved and apathetic child in *The Colourful Disk* gradually opens himself and fares relatively well without his mother's presence. Even though his negative emotionality shows "impressive continuity" throughout infancy, childhood, and adolescence, he eventually becomes less negative and more socially oriented with a supportive maternal grandmother and, later, his more attentive mother. This illustrates how helpful cooperative breeders may foster the self-regulatory capacity of the child and lead to a positive change in negative emotionality (Belsky, Fish, and Isabella 1991, 422). Both early and later experiences in the childhood family are influential on the child's mental and physical growth (Belsky et al. 2007, 1315).

Zhang (2002, 88) believes that a reasonable and salutary social system should allow for various different individual wills and choices. Every woman should have the right

and possibility to keep her own choice: whether she wants to stay at home with her children, aspires to combining profession and reproduction, or prefers to remain childless. Zhang would agree that “[m]others are important, but they are not the only ones who can provide the caring, nurturing relationship” that children need to survive and grow, and that the caretaking task need to the responsibility of many instead of only one (Vandermassen 2005, 183). The task can be safely delegated to other surrogates, related or unrelated, as long as they are continuously engaged and dedicated. Thus the protagonist Xiao Xiao can leave very calmly, even without feeling any “so-called maternal grief,” and be relieved when she sees and hears that her son’s grandparents do dote on him. On two occasions, Xiao Xiao sighs that her son “could grow his teeth without a mother” (Zhang 1996a, 208, 278, 280, 321).

“Instinctive” maternal calculations

The conditional maternal commitment of real-world mothers and the idealized, mythologized mothering – a culturally constructed ideology – are at great odds. The maternal myth also regards motherhood as instinctive and reflexive (Shou 2006, 59). In real life, become a mother, women undergo a composite of biological changes and responses that accompany pregnancy, parturition or lactation. These changes, however, do not automatically induce motherly devotion and nurturing behaviours.

Nevertheless, maternal reactions remain largely consistent throughout human history and across cultures, even when maternity was ideologically disregarded during the Mao years in China. Certainly non-nurturing mothers such as Xiao Xiao undermine the “essentialist” argument about mothers who are automatically, genetically preprogrammed to nurture every baby they produce. But the retrenchment of Xiao Xiao’s maternal commitment should be better interpreted as resulting from her “instinctive” maternal response as she weighs her life stage, her socioeconomic circumstances, and the requirements of maternal input, rather than being ascribed to the cultural construct – an attitude peculiar to a particular period in China.

In all known human societies, mothers assume the primary responsibility for childcare, invest in children the most, and shoulder most of the housework. After participating in socioeconomic life, women become the main carriers of both reproductive and productive workload. As dual-career mothers and the heavily-investing sex, women are supposed to face a reproductive tradeoff harsher than men whose investment input is markedly lower, in order to combine production and reproduction. When Laidi in Zhang’s novella *An Hourly Worker* finishes working and cleaning for sixteen hours for one family after another, rushing around in the huge city of Beijing, she has to do the laundry and tend the hearth at home “to be like a woman” (Zhang 1997c: 281). She saves her hourly wages to spend on the children’s future education, while every late evening she forgoes a stuff-steam bun, which would allay her hunger, until she gets

gastritis. The mental torment and emotional expenses caused by the ruptured mother-child attachment are greater and more painstaking.

Even divorce does not appear to weaken mothers' solicitude for children. In the novella, *The Colourful Disk*, the mother, after divorce and remarriage, still invests heavily in the child from the previous marriage. She spends much time, energy, effort, and resources on his education, hoping for him to grow healthily, both physically and mentally. Meanwhile, the defunct marital relationship greatly estranges the child from his biological father even though the court has granted custody of the child to the father. The father does not even keep track of the child's whereabouts.

Children's survival and well-being are taken into their mothers' consideration all along. Illiterate Laidi's two paragraphs of remarks point to the kernel:

If she [(Laidi)] hadn't gone off to work, perhaps she couldn't even pay the two children's tuition fees. Unable to read, they would be illiterate just like her, and could never have their day. As their mother, wouldn't she repent to death? (Zhang 1997, 272)

For the youngest sister, there really wasn't any food at home. My [(Laidi's)] mother took her to the road, and said that if somebody picked her up, maybe she would have a chance of survival. (Zhang 1997, 256)

Whether abandoning them to an unknown destiny (or an illusionary better future) by Laidi's mother in the 1950s, sending them away by Xiao Xiao in the 1960s, leaving the children behind by Laidi and Zhima in the 1990s, or terminating the gestation by Tao Tao in the 2000s, mothers make the decisions taking into account their children's interest.

Mother-child conflicts and mothers' guilt

Conditional maternal solicitude leads to various mother-offspring conflicts. Infants need full-time, completely committed, and constantly-in-contact caregivers in order to feel secure and develop normally. Considering the vital, often irreplaceable months or years of breastfeeding, it is convenient and effective for a newborn to form attachment preferentially to the mother, who typically is the first person who comes to offer the requisite care. But mothers are often physically and/or emotionally absent. Then the entrusted caretakers can be disqualified or even exploitative. Maternal negligence during childhood may have long-standing negative consequences for children's physical and emotional development (Vandermassen 2005, 99; Belsky, Fish, and Isabella 1991; Belsky, Steinberg, and Draper 1991; Belsky et al. 2007).

Suckled by an undernourished and non-committed wet-nurse and deprived of maternal love, Xiao Xiao's son is emaciated and downcast. He hardly grows in six months (Zhang 1996a, 278). Ruptured of emotional attachment to their mother, Zhima's children do

poorly in school (Zhang 2006a, 473). Obsessed by his parents' divorce and lack of parental supervision, the skinny and maladjusted child, Zhong Cong, performs poorly in his entrance examination and can barely be admitted into an average high school. Mother-infant separation and living with committed yet not-so-well-mannered kin as sources of developmental disturbance also influence his interpersonal social skills. Having "emotional deficiency" and being unable to candidly express his feelings, he feels incompetent and unconfident in social life, and fails to develop the normal capacities for passion and trust in others (Zhang 1995, 147). "With a very unhappy childhood," Zhang's own son is "depressed, heavy-hearted, and lonely, always wastes his time and has below-average academic records." Zhang "has been worried that he has autism or athymia," and does not expect that, after twenty years, "the scar in his heart is still persistently difficult to heal" (Zhang 2007a, 60, 61, 62). The earlier-established developmental trajectory is surprisingly obstinately maintained.

The sentiments of anxiety, distress, self-contempt, terror, rage or desolation that children sequentially experience after parents' divorces and mothers' disappearance are carefully recounted in *The Colourful Disk*. One child has a recurring nightmare and loses all her hair. Zhong Cong feels that nobody can understand what it means to "be scared" if s/he has not experienced parents' vehement quarrel or breaking up. All these children feel shamed of and chagrined at their families' "secrets." Some desperately try to reunite the family, some cling over-tightly to the mother, sensing the loss of security and attachment, and others develop into delinquents – "juvenile thieves" who "are unmotivated to respect 'authority' and short on 'compliance'" (Zhang 1995, 74–5, 142; Hrdy 2001, 99).

Children vary in their susceptibility to rearing influences and differentially manifest how they are affected (Belsky et al. 2007, 1316, 1318). Sinking into a state of despair and apathy after mothers' departures is a theme especially elaborated in Zhang's stories. In *The Invisible Companion*, six months after dispatching her newborn to the wet nurse, Xiao Xiao comes to see her baby, only to find an introverted and apathetic child who disregards her and does not display any distress about her long disappearance and detachment. In *The Colourful Disk*, the maternally deprived child, Zhong Cong, grows into a spineless and apathetic adolescent.

These two apathetic children – Xiao Xiao's son in *The Invisible Companion* and Zhong Cong in *The Colourful Disk* – can be classified as "insecurely and avoidantly attached" children. They seek to elude the mothers upon their short return and negatively consider them as selfish, untrustworthy, and insensitive, but appear unnervingly nonchalant as if they did not care. In *The Invisible Companion*, the baby's look is "always so vague and elusive," and his eyes overflow with "an unmistakable indifference and weariness" (Zhang 1996a, 193, 278). At seven months old, he reencounters his mother Xiao Xiao. When Xiao Xiao twice reaches out to hold him in her arms, he recoils in languish or fear and moves his head away, avoiding precisely the person who usually is the

primary object of desire and attachment. In *The Colourful Disk*, when Zhong Cong is reunited with his mother after eleven years' separation, he also repeatedly lowers his head to avoid her gaze, and shrinks back to avoid her attempts to hug him or make any other bodily contact.

Under conditions of marital discord and inconsistent rearing, insecurely attached youngsters like those children in *The Colourful Disk* are at greater risk of developing into depressed, self-centered, and skeptical sociopaths (internalizing symptoms), or becoming noncompliant, impulsive, and aggressive (externalizing symptoms) (Belsky, Steinberg, and Draper 1991, 652). In terms of children's subsequent developmental outcomes, mothers who are absent and far less responsive to children's emotional needs can harm as likely as help their children.

An evolutionary viewpoint of parent-offspring conflicts is helpful in understanding the harm of maternal deprivation. Trivers (1974) proposes that, only sharing one half of their genes, parents and offspring have incongruous interests in many matters (Oliverio 1994, 114). The mother-child dyad is often an imperfect and loosened bond full of disagreement and contradiction, instead of a harmonious unity. Beginning with the "war in the womb," mother-child conflicts persist (Hrdy 1999b, 388–9, 473). Zhang (1996a, 162, 177, 178) writes in *The Invisible Companion*, "When a woman's body was possessed by another life, she couldn't reign herself any more. That life ... forced her to place everything she had at its disposal and service." "The fetus, to which she has given its life, turned over and became her master." But the woman, Xiao Xiao, only wishes and is happy to be "freed" after the "bitter struggle" with the developing embryo.

When resources are scarce, the needs of a mother and her young unavoidably collide. The intensification of mother-offspring conflict occurs in particular when a mother has her own pursuits that can be detrimental to the well-being of her children. This raises again the question of mothers' subsistence and status-striving ambitions. Implicitly or explicitly intended for the good of offspring, it is not always optimal for them. Often, insecurities among children and stress in the mothers ensue; status and motherhood are not always convergent as expected.

Secondly, mother-offspring conflict intensifies when mothers try to promote their overall reproductive and life success fitness against current children's will and needs. Allocation of parental resources and efforts for one offspring can diminish parents' ability to invest in other offspring (Trivers 1972, 67). In *The Colourful Disk*, two children, Li Xiang and Zhong Cong, rather manipulatively seek to extract additional maternal investment at the expense of their future siblings. After Zhong Cong eventually explodes with anger and implies that he does not want a step-sibling, the mother soon chooses abortion to ensure him that there will not be a step-sibling halving his share of maternal love. Herein lies the poignant tension between maternal commitment to these children and frustration at their high demands (Hrdy 1994, 4). What might be

considered the optimal behaviour from the perspective of these children is definitely not the optimal choice for the mothers.

Thirdly, when mother-child conflict concerns mothers' own emotional needs, more often than not, children are the party that will be sacrificed. Zhang's popular novel *The Gallery of Love* evinces how limited and conditional a mother's self-sacrifice can be. When the mother and her adolescent daughter fall in love with the same man, instead of being self-sacrificing and retreating from the competition, the mother betrays her daughter's trust and love, and cohabits with the man behind the daughter's back, while the daughter suffers intensely from both lovesickness and maternal deprivation, and loses both her artistic talent and academic performance.

Clearly, Zhang's opinion is that women need not sacrifice their own emotional life for the sake of motherhood: "When traditional 'maternity' violently conflicts with women's 'self' ... [women] should revert to independent individuals" (Zhang 2002f, 42; 2007c, 259). For the working mothers split by two pressing and incompatible urges, Zhang (2002, 82) states: "Women themselves are important and shouldn't abnegate themselves for the sake of children." Women who put the interests of children first and give themselves over to caregiving "may succeed as mothers; yet as humans, they are perhaps losers;" it is an "inextricable maze and contradiction" (Zhang 1996d, 199). Luo Qian in Zhang's novella *The Pale Mists of Dawn* (1980) and Zhaodi in *A Sojourner* (1997) are the loser-mothers captive to children's needs and interests. Luo Qian forsakes her love and remarries a man with advantageous political status for her children's future, but thereafter lives in profound melancholy and nostalgia for the rest of her life. In *A Sojourner*, considering and caring for her children take precedence over the mother's immediate well-being, but the result is that the mother is enslaved and despised by the whole family in spite of her round-the-clock, arduous, and meticulous service.

Unfortunately, absent and ambivalent mothers are still feeling guilt (for maternal guilt, see Rotkirch and Janhunen 2009, 93). Zhang (1990, 42) herself, rather self-contradictorily, says that she is "ashamed of being such a mother," and that it pricks her conscience that she has not cared enough for her son and knows little about his inner thoughts because of her absence. The ambivalence of confirmation and regret of her choice permeates her writings. Giving priority to mothers' own needs and aspirations undesirably results in neglecting children's emotional needs and the failure of the formation of a mother-child bond. Torn between maternity and vocation, and between unpaid "mother-work" and paid work (Brush 1996, 430), Zhang is not the only mother who is haunted and harassed by the accusatorial doubts. In her *The Gallery of Love*, the cruel choice the mother has made is also fraught with affliction and self-condemnation, even though she thereby possesses the bliss of a man's love.

Maternal guilt also frequently results from the unrealistically high expectations of the motherhood myth (Rotkirch and Janhunen 2009, 103). As Zhang (1996d, 199) writes,

“I’m really not an integrated and standard woman.” This image of a “standard woman” evokes the motherhood myth that depicts mothers as universally present, nurturing, and benevolent. The differences between unrealistic expectations and actual motherhood induce guilt in Zhang and other absent or ambivalent mothers, and plague them.

Maternal emotions of guilt and shame serve the interest of children and other caregivers as a regulator inhibiting indifference or intolerance and promoting maternal investment in children (Rotkirch and Janhunen 2009, 93). In *The Invisible Companion*, despite the failure of maternal attachment, Xiao Xiao remits more than half of her salary to her child every month. Zhang (2002, 82) says in an interview that now she always tries her best to satisfy her son’s needs. After living alone for eleven years, she remarried in 1983, but has not had another child. In *The Colourful Disk*, the child Zhong Cong senses that the mother “seems to do her utmost to compensate and remedy something” and carefully prepares for their holiday to make him happy. To further relieve her feeling of guilt, she terminates the pregnancy in order to focus all her maternal care sources on him. Then she caresses his hand (he thus forgives her and accepts her intimacy) and says, “I was not a good mother ... Now it’s possible that I will be better later” (Zhang 1995, 145, 171). Guilt induces truly great maternal sacrifice in this situation of mother-offspring conflicts over the mother’s own emotional needs and reproductive interests.

Young children’s strategies

Finally, the theme of children’s counterstrategies is central to Zhang’s depictions of mothers and children. Conditional maternal commitment has produced selection pressures on infants and children to actively elicit maternal or alloparental engagement and ensure it is ongoing. Maybe because maternal ambivalence has been regarded as abnormal or pathological, infants’ counterstrategies yet have received very little attention (Hrdy 1999b, 533). It is the infant, first and foremost, who senses how available and committed the mother is (Hrdy 2009, 7). While displaying infantile appealing traits and signaling robustness and viability may have evolved as cues to elude maternal care, appearing nonchalant and avoidant or being manipulative can also be adaptive and effective strategies for a child under the circumstances when maternal investment becomes unpredictable (Hrdy 2001, 97, 103).

In *The Invisible Companion*, before Xiao Xiao, the baby is described as always indifferently lying down. Instead of whining pitifully as a needy yet disregarded supplicant as Xiao Xiao expects, the infant chooses not to display his distress. For a mother who is stressed and depressed, advertising vulnerability and emitting distress may be very inappropriate and can further disturb and repulse her, and all the more make her feel “frustrated and fidgeted” (Zhang 1996a, 188). Xiao Xiao’s baby elects to conceal his inner despair, resentment, and extreme anguish, and appear indifferent and avoidant. It is a reaction of despair and a silent demonstration, seemingly weak and feeble, yet

potently protesting and reproaching the mother's disengagement and evoking her feeling of guilt. At the last moment, when Xiao Xiao leaves the baby with the wet nurse, he "suddenly opens his eyes" and gives her a "terribly cold," "frozen" farewell glance, which soundlessly and repeatedly echoes in Xiao Xiao's mind as the accusation: "You're a bad mother." It even becomes her nightmare that her son sprays bullets from an assault rifle on her and heckles her over her maternal "demerits" of not providing milk and care (Zhang 1996a, 207, 384).

In a similar way, the fifteen-year-old Zhong Cong in *The Colourful Disk* also appears avoidant and unconcerned about his mother's love after experiencing distress, injuries, and resentment. Rather than wretchedly beseeching his mother's return, he restrains the outburst of his inner sentiments and carefully encloses them with reticence and apartness. Only in his fantasies and dreams, he releases his longing and immerses himself in the flow of mother's milk and love. In his social life, he also dodges the development of intimacy, as "it might be highly adaptive for an avoidantly attached individual to learn to downplay love, to dismiss the importance of close human relationships" (Hrdy 1999b, 525). It would be a self-protective tactic for a despaired person to cope with the uncertainty of affiliation and commitment.

Clinging tightly to the mother is another strategy for immature children who detect a (potential) reduction of maternal solicitude, as "offspring survival is crucially dependent on mother-offspring contact and proximity" (Maestripieri 2011, 523). This strategy is often employed by children whose mother-child relation falls into the category of anxious attachments. For some kids in *The Colourful Disk*, both seeking to remain close all the time and manipulatively monitoring mothers' sexual and reproductive behaviours, become the central preoccupation in their life after their mothers' divorces. The child Li Xiang says, "I wouldn't let my mother get married again. . . . If some man comes here, I will keep on kicking doors, closing drawers or throwing pillows away. I will definitely refuse to go to sleep and won't let them talk. This is my mother and she can't be anybody else's" (Zhang 1995, 140). Being self-centred and negligent to the mother's feelings and needs may from a child's perspective be a way of making the best of an unpropitious situation (Hrdy 1999b, 527).

Li Xiang also abets Zhong Cong to be manipulative, exploitative, and self-serving. They take it for granted that their mothers should feel guilty and be willing to do anything to "double expiate" their maternal "wrongs" (Zhang 1995, 105). Unlike relatively helpless infants, they can present their anger face to face and reprove their mothers fiercely. Zhang's own son has been brooding on her being away for over twenty years and regarded it as the ultimate source of his unhappiness. He cannot dispel the spite against her and eventually explodes with anger before her (Zhang 2007a, 62). As a result, the maternal guilt is further aroused and deepened, and maternal investment monopolized and reassured. The children gain the upper hand in mother-child conflicts

and record complete victory in the competition with the possible future siblings for maternal care resources.

Discussion

A central feminist concern has been “the reduction of women’s bodies and biology to their reproductive capacity. Feminists challenged these reductions as biologically deterministic and pointed to their profound impact on women’s political and economic marginalization” (Subramaniam 2009, 957). This evolutionary reading of Zhang’s maternal stories has aimed to show that applying an evolutionary biological perspective does not reduce the complexities and specificities of mothering to a simplified functional practice, but on the contrary exposes them. It also indicates that the ideas of the motherhood myth and social constructionism are unable to fully and impartially explain maternal behaviours and emotions.

An evolutionary perspective is conducive to the recognition of human mothers’ conditional commitment to their children and the importance of cooperative child-rearing. Mothering is a demanding and prolonged task and, as dual-career mothers, women have to make trade-offs between their reproductive efforts and their life stage and conditions, and allocate or withhold maternal resources according to their circumstances. The availability of support from one or more alloparents and/or from a well-established communal child-rearing social system often becomes a necessity. Zhang’s stories illustrate both the necessity of supportive kin and alloparental networks and their inherent tensions.

Far from invalidating the existence of any maternal instincts, I would argue that Zhang’s maternal stories provide insights into the biological underpinnings of maternal commitment (Hrdy 2001, 66). When acknowledging the entanglement of motherhood in the narratives of race, class and gender (Brush 1996, 453), it is also important to recognize that the ultimate causes underlying mothers’ dilemma and calculations remain largely invariable, even though the proximate ones for each maternal tactic and response are contingent and variable. The dilemma of working and ambitious mothers are not new and not particular to one or two historical periods or cultural contexts.

For most of human existence, and long before that, primate mothers have been dual-career mothers, combining productive lives with reproduction and forced to compromise between maternal and infant needs (Hrdy 1999b, 109). In the hunter-gatherer society in which women made a major contribution to food production and the number of calories from women’s gathered foods frequently exceeded that from men’s hunting, whenever possible mothers temporarily entrusted babies to the care of reliable and willing relatives in order to go foraging freely and efficiently without toting babies (Campbell 2002, 141; Sear and Mace 2008, 1). Solutions can differ,

but the compromises mothers make and the rudimentary maternal calculations stay remarkably constant.

Nevertheless, absent and ambivalent mothers are often harassed by feelings of guilt, as a consequence of conditional maternal investment, various parent-offspring conflicts, and the high expectations of good motherhood. Furthermore, conditional maternal commitment has produced infants' and children's counterstrategies to elicit maternal or alloparental engagement. Both maternal guilt and young children's counterstrategies have adaptive values as they regulate and promote maternal investment.

This evolutionary review of mothering in Zhang's writings is rather disturbing. It exposes mothers' oftentimes hard-hearted reproductive calculations, young children's self-centered counterstrategies, and other predispositions that we may consider politically unattractive and morally undesirable. Evolutionary theory in itself is value-free and only descriptive. For a better picture of mothering and of both mothers' and children's well-being, it is significant to recognize the importance of sufficient and efficient alloparental support from both the social microsystem (family, kin) and the social macrosystem (society, institutions).

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