

PATHLIGHT

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西川

Xi Chuan

Xi Chuan, one of China's most cosmopolitan and influential poets, has published six poetry anthologies, including *Private Preferences* and *Enough for a Dream*, various non-fiction, and translations of authors such as Pound, Borges, and Gary Snyder. His poems and essays have been published in newspapers and periodicals in more than 20 countries. In 2011, the Tinfish Press of Hawaii published Xi Chuan's poetry collection, *Yours Truly & Other Poems*, and the following year New Directions Press published *Notes on the Mosquito: Selected Poems by Xi Chuan*, which was nominated for the 2013 Best Translated Book Award and won the 2013 Lucien Stryk Asian Translation Prize.

Abstruse Thoughts at the Panjiayuan Antiques Market

Is a *beautiful fake* antique beautiful? Beautiful *fake people* can be beautiful but they're fake.
Fake people are devoid of *souls*. A sea of fake people wouldn't yield a lake of souls!
Then can *beauty* be divorced from soul?

Are junk-like *real* antiques really *junk*?
Someone who recognizes the *value* of junk insists that's junk eh that's junk:
he has to look like he doesn't care to get a *junk rate*.

To buy a Warring States-era paring knife at a junk rate would piss off the bronze men who
pared bamboo slats in the Warring States era.
Looking back on the Warring States bronze men with today's *sense of existence*, they all seem so
timidly foreign to *globalized reality*.
How did they become *greats*? I don't get it.

The Warring States ended in 221 BCE.
No bronze items from later than the Jin conquest of Eastern Wu in 280 CE mean anything.

Are two-thousand-year-old real antiques *even more* real than two-hundred-year-old antiques?
Are counterfeit antiques from twenty years ago still *counterfeit* today?
"The sun in the meridian may be the sun in decline," said Huizi.
Don't you feel *ashamed* asking all these *metaphysical* questions in the din of a *market*?

Would you dare call Huizi shameful?
He was steeped in metaphysical questions not only in the din of the *market*,
but in the *palace* of Wei where he served as minister for fifteen years, and in the *wilderness* after
his twenty military defeats.

So do three-thousand-year-old real antiques look fake because they're too real?
Was King Yu unreal four thousand years ago, too?
Was the scholar Gu Jiegang right to *doubt antiquity*?
Even if the *three sage kings* Yao, Shun, and Yu were real that still wouldn't prove that the junk
arranged on the *mat* truly came from that time.

Every cloud in the sky above Panjiayuan bears some *similarity* with clouds from that time.

... ..

Oh how *cultivated* must the counterfeiter be to make such counterfeits?
How much *gall* must a *grave robber* have to go *nose to nose* underground with the ancients by
torchlight or flashlight?

But do you think I can't tell *real* from *fake*?
Do you think there's something wrong with my *intellect*? Even if something were wrong with
my intellect there'd be nothing wrong with my *morality*.

Liars and *moral exemplars* have similar faces, and add up to "*human being*."
And distinguishing between liars and moral exemplars is, I'm afraid, not an *easy* feat.

Liars have no intention to make such distinctions, moral exemplars no time;
Like ants on a hot wok these distinctions must be made which neither liars nor moral
exemplars understand:

namely *persons* between liars and moral exemplars,
namely *demigods* revolving *the earth*, and *demihumans* concerned about the healthy
development of *the next generation*,
namely *demighosts* who sauntered over the dirt heap that was the *Panjiayuan ghost market* in the
early eighties and have been hooting and howling until today.

So are they *real* or are they *fake*?

Even fake people enjoy the *right* to be followed by *shadows* namely the right to apply for
identification cards.
So many *holders* of identification cards are actually fakes.

A more difficult question applicable to the din of the market:
Can an *unreal real* person or a person *half real half fake* enjoy the right to be unreal real or half
real half fake?
This isn't garrulousness or being abstruse,
since the "*Beauty, Truth, and Goodness*" of Keats or Schiller were unsentimentally destroyed by
items half real half fake.

Cao Xueqin who knew *the unreal real* oh Cao Xueqin the abstruse,
he knew not the *half real half fake* material, moral, and political world.
Did he never *touch* half real half fake *items*? At any rate he never set foot in Panjiayuan.

People half real half fake pursue a *happiness* half real half fake,
fall in *love* half real half fake, and fall into a daze looking at half real half fake antiques; their
demands for *justice* are half real half fake.
On a world half real half fake they *gain* a sense of unreal reality we might call *transcendent*!

... ..

Saturdays or Sundays they come to Panjiayuan, stroll around, treasure hunt, dream of *filling in*
gaps;
they meet fake people and real people, they meet ghosts and deities,
they are startled running into their half real half fake selves, and *pretend* it was nothing.

Panjiayuan Flea Market is located at the southwest of Panjiayuan bridge, South road of East third ring road, Chaoyang District, Beijing. Covering an area of 48,500m², it is divided into six sections: Roadside stands, Ancient Architecture, Classical Furniture, Modern collection, Sculpture and Stone Engraving, and the Catering section. Trading mostly in antiques, handicrafts, ornaments, and other collectibles, Panjiayuan has an annual revenue of several hundred million yuan. Having more than four thousand shop owners, this market has nearly ten thousand shop assistants in which sixty percent are from the other twenty-eight provinces and municipalities except Beijing. People here come from a variety of backgrounds, there are more than ten minorities of Hui, Man, Miao, Dong, Uigur, Mongolian, Korean, and other ethnic groups of China.
—Wikipedia

Panjiayuan, a trash heap of 1,200 eras piled on top of each other.
Twelve million dreamers spread out this heap beneath the sky of the *three sage kings*.

Here comes an official looking like a boss, here comes a professor looking like an old student
still vaguely progressive,
here comes an *idler* and a *law-breaking officer of the law* calling each other brother,
here comes an online salesman, and legendary *pixiu* not for sale online *eating* but *not shitting*
out real and fake goods.

Only with people buying fake antiques can you never be sure if they're truly *idiots* or if they
serve some other purpose...

Panjiayuan gives the *three sage kings'* sky *vertigo*.

Oh land of intermingling *fish and dragons* who's your fish and who your dragon?
If *fish* are happy metamorphosing into dragons, are *dragons* happy metamorphosing into fish?
Reverse *inference* says: what does not consider metamorphosing into a fish must be a dragon.
What is a dragon will bare its fangs and brandish its claws, or else have eyes heavy with
sleep.

Here comes *someone* with eyes heavy with sleep.
Experienced in the *truth and falsehood* of the world, he is weary, and has extracted himself from
the *woods* in which the tall tree suffers the gale, and where the monkeys scatter once the
tree falls.

When he *makes an appearance* in Panjiayuan once again, the *happy* lice on his body are reborn.
He sees his old acquaintances, takes an old piss in the public toilet,
meets people he'd cheated, nonchalantly,
and says to the administrators collecting mat fees: *beh beh*, I've washed my hands of this.

... ..

A *trading* place. This *trading* place opposed by Shang Yang is also opposed by *Chairman Mao*.
A place where *the past* and *Chairman Mao* are traded is Panjiayuan.
Where a fake past is traded, this is the Panjiayuan of the post-Mao *mixed economy*.

Fake antiques are also the fruits of *labor*, whose cost can never be eradicated, but to pass fake
antiques onto people is *immoral*.
Most real antiques come about through *grave robbing*, but that's immoral, too.
Panjiayuan is an immoral place. Why is it so *enchanting*?

Play with fire and you're bound to get burned, when the *bick* market security guard
transforms listlessly into a connoisseur of cultural relics
the *effete* old connoisseur should just *effetely sweep up* and be lied to.
Sorry, Panjiayuan is a place of *lies*.

Panjiayuan is a place of the *law* of sound and fury and one eye open one eye shut.
Where the law lets immoral fake antiques pass with a nod.
Though fake antiques upset the purchaser, it's not like anyone *dies* from it and *national* interest
doesn't suffer.

This is a place for the acquisition of knowledge, *correct* knowledge and *incorrect* knowledge.

This is a place *wealthy people* might happen to patronize.

All *peddlers* know intuitively to wait for someone inconspicuously wealthy.
Best are the *stupidly* wealthy. Godot was stupid, too.

This is an *administrated* place. The routine business of administrative voices in loudspeakers
warning visitors not to get taken in.
But when is anyone at Panjiayuan not *taken in*?
Hearing the peddlers' habitual *vows* undulate across Panjiayuan you feel like you're living
amongst valuable people.

This is a place where city and country, home and abroad, modernity and antiquity, the present
and the present all *come together*.
So it *isn't* the present, it isn't antiquity, it isn't abroad, it isn't the country, it isn't the city.

... ..

Living *amongst valuable people* you have to believe: the *honest* maintain the majority!

The peddlers are here, liars and thieves and traffickers in goods robbed from graves are all
here; the useless wares unloaded from flatbed tricycles:

The 99.9% fake antiques and the 0.1% real junk compete to see who'll sell for a *better price*.
Only the Panjiayuan price is a price of *impulse* or a price of *passion*.

From porphyry axes to Cultural Revolution armbands, six thousand years cram in next to each
other.
Six thousand years can cram in next to each other because the *imaginings* of six thousand years
can cram in next to each other,

The construction site of *the socialist market economy* consumes six thousand years like a plate of appetizers.

From the five lakes and four seas people come to Panjiayuan to sell fakes and traffic in stolen goods.

Five lakes and four seas of fellow villagers and fellow grave robbers *laugh all the way to the bank*.

Then when there are no graves left to rob they lead *moral* lives as they *sell fakes*.

Peddlers under awnings laugh about each others' earnings, *like* it was their own earnings, laugh about each others' wives, like it was their own wives.

In fact each one *dreams* of "*dwelling poetically upon this earth*."

"Dwelling poetically upon this earth" relies upon the *cliché* of living *life* to the fullest, which befits the cliché of morality.

And befitting the cliché of morality is most likely *harmful*.

You see, sellers of fakes only accept *real money* for "*dwelling poetically upon this earth*."

Fake bills may pass through the hands of peddlers of real merchandise, since *counterfeiters* will *pursue* their own "*dwelling poetically upon this earth*."

They've never heard of Heidegger just like Heidegger never heard of Panjiayuan.

If a counterfeiter really wanted to buy fake antiques he'd be a real *sage*.

... ..

Old Su from Sanmenxia is almost a sage: selling junk at a junk rate has brought him a good reputation.

Indignant at his limited earnings he has no time for *humor*;

He's proclaimed a hundred times that he is going to sell fakes, and that selling fakes would make him more moral.

Others' *plush life* from selling fakes pushes him toward the margins of morality.

“What world is this! The fake is beautiful which is good which attracts customers which *fuck that fucking shit!*”

He’s proclaimed a hundred and one times that he is going to sell fakes.
At the margins of morality he hasn’t noticed the *deity* with a face like a silver platter standing beside him.

Sometimes he disappears, maybe having crossed the *border* of morality.
Maybe when he disappears he’s a fake person,
and the deity seizes him and *transforms* him back into real life *delivering* him back to Panjiayuan.

Always talking, Old Su is tired, stops for three seconds so heaven and earth and time and tide can *catch up*, then continues:

“This bronze hairpin is from the Tang dynasty it’s a hundred kuai you want it?
My wife only brings in two hundred as a *substitute teacher* what’s wrong with you you think *it’s expensive?*”

Red-eyed Old Su shouts as if *silence* would send him flying from the earth.
The way he sees it the world is *people*, and not being among people scares him.
Having no choice but to walk *alone*, to drink alone, to sing alone *scares* him.

Best to keep talking.
Birds are always talking so they don’t fly high; who’s ever heard of birds chirping on while flying high?
The wind talks, too, but *stops* sometimes.

... ..

The inextinguishable past.
“Frying ghosts” is a kind of fakery. Boiling jade in water for thirty minutes to revive it.
As if *the underworld* were a place where you could come and go *as you pleased*.

The Tang is not far, nor the Han, the people of the Warring States *have stood up*.

I've seen Mencius and Xunzi, I've seen Liu An and Liu Xiang and Liu Xin and Liu Yiqing.
"Liu Xiang passed down the classics but my heart's mission failed"
Liu Xin distorted the *Zuo zhuan* for the fake emperor Wang Mang with *repercussions that continue to this day*.

The people of Panjiayuan are knowledgeable, even about ghosts, though few bring up *ghosts* anymore,
they're afraid their *selves* will slip out if they say too much.

Ghosts don't make fakes, but can they call themselves fake?
If ghosts are fake then can RMB be fake?

The woman selling beads says I've seen a real ghost. It was tall, it came right up to my door,
and its head was higher than the doorway, so it either couldn't come in or didn't want to. It just wanted to scare me or else give me some kind of warning. I went to the *temple* and lit incense for forty-nine days that's seven times seven. My way to return his things *to heaven*. He never came back.

Fascicle twenty of Gan Bao's *Search for the Supernatural* details Ruan Zhan's insistence in the non-existence of ghosts, even when a particularly eloquent visitor came to discuss Daoism. When the topic turned to gods and ghosts, the visitor capitulated to Ruan Zhan, though he added: "But I am a ghost!" and vanished. Discountenanced, Ruan Zhan was silent for a long time. Little over a year later he fell ill and died.

But Panjiayuan is a place that *casts a cold eye* on death,
a place where *atheists* declaim but without lofty topics to declaim on,
a place *believers* pray for *the gods* to forgive.

Buddhas, bodhisattvas, Christs, angels, gods of the earth, gods of wealth, Guan Yu, and the constellation Wen Chang stroll through Panjiayuan.
Their wood and stone figurines and bronze figurines stand or sit under the awnings *without making a sound*.

They listen as peddlers from Shaanxi say "I'm not looking for chump change" and charge 3,500,000 RMB for a Western Zhou *xu* cauldron robbed from a grave.

They hear a peddler from Tianjin swear: "Of course this is agate and not glass; if it's glass I'll
eat it!"

... ..

Trafficking in fakes he trafficked himself fake.
Trafficking in goods of the dead he trafficked till he *died*.

Before death he demanded *real medicine* which is just common sense, before dying he stared
into *the abyss* which basic intellect can achieve.

A last look at the *starry night* before entering that starry night,
the way, as they say, you can only look back at the *earth* from space and cannot see the other
stars.

His *fear* was real and true. Looking into the starry night his *sense of the sublime* was real and
true.
The sublime always arrives *too late* until a *future* in which truth and falsity are *abolished*
suddenly appears.

In the past, the dead feared grave robbers: especially rulers *ordained by heaven* feared grave
robbers.
Today grave robbers fear the Public Security Bureau, while the Public Security Bureau fears
the *Chairman of the People's Republic*.
In other countries the Chairman of the People's Republic is just a president,
but in the past he was *emperor*.

Does it *feel* the same to be chairman and president and emperor?
Go ask Yuan Shikai or maybe Napoleon.

For the past and future go ask a *fortune teller*, for fortune and calamity, longevity and death, go
ask a *monk or priest*,
for career advancement and getting rich go ask a *qigong master*, for the fluctuations of love go
ask *your big sister*,

attachment to money does not impede attachment to *the Buddha*, but with the Buddha there's nothing to be attached to.

So quit asking—just shut up already!

... ..

The wind of Panjiayuan blows past all Panjiayuan's ancient and modern shadows.
Even if the Ranked Biography of Bo Yi from *The Records of the Grand Historian* were yellowed from spilled tea it would still be a *literary masterpiece*.

The Sima Qian of Panjiayuan doesn't fear spilled tea.

But the *solitude* of the grand historian is the solitude of five overlords and seven powers:
the solitude of ancient battlefields and rulers' mausoleums, the solitude of present-day polluted markets.

One time, Sun Dianying's gang of bandits came to the solitude of the Eastern Qing tombs.
After their satchel charges blew open the underground palace the bandits plucked the night-glowing bead from the Empress Dowager's lips.
Then the mountains *went back* to their solitude, and the wilderness too. As a hundred insects chirped, combat entangled the *warlords* across *China*.

But 1,800 years ago. Cao Cao's army did not permit their horses to trample the crops;
He looked for bare ability over moral conduct, not sparing ancient tombs.
He took over half of China demanding soldiers' provisions from *the dead*, but then again he only took over half of China. Heh heh.

Having *insulted* too many of the dead he commanded that his own funeral be frugal.
When his grave was dug up 1,800 years later all that was left was one agate *bead*.
His grave is Xigaoxue Tomb No. 2 in Anyang, Henan. A real tomb? A fake tomb? Someone else's tomb?

The provincial government of Henan hung a plaque on it for protection and the *development of tourism*.

The *Romance of Three Kingdoms* radio *play* is still broadcast, though the narrator has already passed.

Real and fake, solitary *items*.

Half real half fake items nevertheless enjoy solitary *wind and rain*, as well as *sunlight* and *starlight*.

While the *wilderness* of occasional human and animal bones, and the *mountains* of booming silence become *solitude itself*.

*January 27 – February 4, 2014
to the Spring Festival's firecrackers*

Translated by Lucas Klein



馮唐

Feng Tang

The consummate chronicler of youth in Beijing, Feng Tang is the author of a series of novels deeply evocative of growing up in the Chinese capital during the 1990s. His main trilogy of semi-autobiographical novels recall the experience of youth and growth with lyric accuracy, and are immensely popular with readers who were a certain age at a certain time. Feng Tang studied medicine at university; his more recent novels, written from his current home in Hong Kong, have been increasingly inclined towards the experimental.

Xiao Ming

By Feng Tang

I

The year was 3012, and everybody on Earth was finally equal. At least as far as health care was concerned.

II

It had taken a lot of preparation for humanity to reach this point.

By the year 2500, all language barriers everywhere on Earth had been torn down. Every one of the 10 billion people on the planet could speak Chinese and English – and nothing else, or at least nothing that they would admit to speaking. All text, audio, and video records were in either Chinese or English. The Chinese was standard broadcast Mandarin; the English was standard New York English. Every information terminal came with an internationally standardized button that could toggle instantly between Chinese and English so that everyone would be free to choose.

To prevent the cultural heritage of mankind from being forgotten, all text, audio, and video records in other languages had by 2500 been translated into Chinese and English. Once the translations were finalized, the original documents were all sealed away in a secret location, behind seven layers of robot-guarded doors. The libraries and websites of the world offered only Chinese- and English-language materials for public perusal. Rather than trusting in the machine translation capabilities of supercomputers (by the year 2400, supercomputers had human capabilities like pattern

recognition, memory, and learning. They could play chess – international *and* Chinese – and Gomoku; write TV shows, movie scripts, stage plays, and op-ed columns; predict tsunamis and earthquakes; draft constitutions, and even flirt. Indeed, by 2400 playing Go and writing love poems were the only things supercomputers couldn't do) the Planetary Translation Bureau took a cue from the three greatest translation efforts of the past: the Medieval Buddhist scripture translations of Kumarajiva, Sengzhao, and Tripitaka during the Wei, Jin, and early Tang dynasties; the Republican Era translations into Chinese from Japanese; and the Meiji Restoration-era translations of texts from Western languages into Japanese. Three thousand volunteers from all over the world answered the call and marched into the headquarters of the Translation Bureau, where they devoted their youth (and, in many cases, their lives) to the effort. Many never left the building again: their sense of mission drove them to devote all of their learning to the cause.

Like Sanskrit, Pali, Akkadian, Latin, Egyptian, Lithuanian, Hebrew, and Tangut before them, Korean, German, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Arabic, and the other minor languages put up a brief struggle, then quickly died out.

By the year 2500, the only surviving language with a significant number of speakers (besides Chinese and English) was French. The few Earthlings who still spoke French had two things in common. One was that on the (extremely) rare occasions that they spoke English, their faces would betray an utter loathing that nothing could hide. The other was that whenever they



Illustration by Li zeyu

spoke French – especially when they were in French restaurants, eating French food, and speaking French – their countenances would light up in utter bliss. High-resolution imaging satellites circling the globe instantly detected these expressions of loathing and bliss, and immediately dispatched the Municipal Brute Squad to drag the persons involved to a language school for de-Frenchification courses.

On the summer solstice of 2550 AD, a ragged

band of Francophones made their last stand in Australia, gathering in Babylon Square and raising their voices in unison to shout at nobody in particular, “*Allez-vous faire enculer, especes de cons, vous et votre langues merdiques! Vous ne nous abattrez pas aussi facile que ça, fils de putes! Vive le Resistance!*”

“Fuck you cunts,” the officers of the Municipal Brute Squad corrected them in English. “And fuck your shitty-ass languages too! We won’t go down

without a fight!” Then they rounded up the hardline Francophones and sent them to language school for de-Frenchification. After the summer of 2550, there were no more language barriers anywhere on Earth.

By the year 2600, there were no longer any nation-states anywhere on Earth. Different countries’ political systems had been getting more and more alike for some time before that, thanks to supercomputers and the results of Phase XIII of the Human Genome Project. When the convergence first started, governments were slow to recognize the fact. They kept on denouncing each other for being stupid whenever they were getting ready to announce a new policy. The general line taken by the newspapers in white countries was: “The white countries are good and so is everything about them. These policies are the only conceivable option. The black countries are rotten and so is everything about them. Their policies are like something a pig would come up with.” The newspapers in black countries, on the other hand, affirmed, “the black countries are good and so is everything about them. These policies are the only conceivable option. The white countries are pathetic and so is everything about them. Those policies are like something a pig would come up with.” When the new policies were announced and found upon comparison to be – Chinese and English versions both – identical, it was a major embarrassment for both the governments and the media. Once the governments accepted the new reality, they took to coordinating with one another before announcing any new policies, so that the announcements would coincide down to the second. In actuality, any Earthling who was interested could have used super-

computers and the results of the Phase XIII of the Human Genome Project to input a few key variables: your GDP (gross domestic product) growth rate, your CPI (consumer price index) growth; your M2 supply; your OBI (online bitching index) indicators, regional figures for the population’s ADB (average distance from Buddhahood), FMI (female menopause indicator) data by territory, and local RFI (regional fuckup indices), and the supercomputers would have spat out policy documents indistinguishable from those drafted by governments around the world. From then on, citizens of black countries and white countries alike greeted the announcement of new policies with a well-worn phrase: “Same shit, different ass.”

Armies, too, gradually lost their relevance. There were assembly instructions for nuclear weapons all over the Internet, and computer interfaces had evolved beyond the keyboard and the mouse to use direct brainwave reading. You didn’t even have to say a word, just think at the computer screen, “Nukes for Dummies,” and a menu would pop up onscreen asking if you wanted to destroy the world (a) once, (b) ten times over, (c) a hundred times over, or (d) a thousand times over. Three days after your brain made its selection, a box containing all the necessary components would arrive on your doorstep. You could put it all together with a screwdriver and a hammer. Civilian-grade nuclear weapons originally lacked the precision of military-grade weapons: their accuracy was limited to a nine-kilometer radius, whereas military-grade nukes were accurate to within nine centimeters. But later this restriction was lifted too, for fear that a civilian-grade bomb would go off-course and cause unnecessary

harm to innocents.

Soon enough the governments of the world came to realize that there wasn't any difference between dying once and dying a thousand times. On the winter solstice of the year 2650, the nations of the world all destroyed their entire nuclear arsenals simultaneously. The remaining fissile material was enough to see humanity through to the year 5012. The governments of the world realized the following day that there was no reason for them to continue as separate entities, and they merged not long afterwards. Before the merger, each of the hundred-odd countries on Earth had an average of more than 10,000 officials at or above the ministry level. After the merger, only 10,000 officials were needed for the whole planet. The 990,000 surplus officials were quickly eliminated through voluntary retirement. Most of them took up new careers as soap opera actors, with a minority becoming astrologers, antique appraisers, sommeliers, or Michelin restaurant inspectors.

In the year 2700 all differences of currency were eliminated everywhere on Earth, leaving only one: the Qiubuck. Qiubucks had no physical form; they were a completely virtual currency. By the year 2700, everyone had a unique planetary identification number, with which their hair, irises, fingerprints, faces, scents, and various personal data terminals were associated. You could authorize a Qiubuck transaction with a puff of breath or a plucked hair.

In the year 2800 wage gaps were eliminated everywhere on the planet. Before every birth, a supercomputer would analyze the fetus's genes to determine the individual's future IQ and EQ, then match these

results against projections for supply and demand in the future job market to determine the most suitable education, means of deflowering, and post-graduation employment for the baby. Since everyone was innocent and people got their jobs by obeying instructions, everyone got an equal salary. Income equality meant that if you were rich before the year 2800, and you weren't an unusually big spender, then you would stay rich: all of your assets were converted to Qiubucks at an exchange rate calculated by the supercomputer. If you were poor, and you hadn't been able to talk other people into giving you money, then you stayed poor. In the year 2800, robbery and other violent crimes were impossible. If you so much as contemplated committing a robbery, you could count on the Municipal Brute Squad arriving in three minutes or less. Even though the gap between the rich and the poor still existed after the year 2800, people lost all hope of ever eliminating it. Eventually they made their peace with this. Since a hair or a breath was enough to authorize a Qiubuck transaction, it wasn't hard to spot rich people after the year 2800. If you saw someone being careful not to breathe too heavily, or looking around to make sure they weren't shedding hairs, and who remained on high alert whenever they talked to anyone, they were sure to be rich.

In the year 2900 all flavor disparities were wiped off the face of the Earth. The only flavors that remained came, to no one's surprise, from Chinese cuisine, with its world-renowned General Tso's Chicken and Peking Duck. British cuisine didn't make the grade because Britain hadn't made anything edible since 1912. French cuisine didn't make it for fear of

stirring up the few remaining individuals who hadn't been completely de-Frenchified.

III

In fact, by the year 3012 all the necessary preparations were in place, and there were no more physical obstacles to achieving perfect planet-wide equality. But equality was such a massive thing, after all, a goal the human race had pursued ever since its inception. You couldn't just announce and implement it overnight. Even with all the preparations, even with all the supporting evidence in the world, the planetary government would never take such a huge risk without a pilot program to start with. After three days of intense discussion, the planetary government resolved to begin with health care. Starting on January 1, 3012, everyone everywhere would enjoy perfectly equal medical treatment.

The reasons for this were simple. One was ethical: every person had their starting point at birth and their end point at death. There were no differences whatsoever between where people started and where people ended. What happened in between might vary from person to person, but given the vast wealth and productivity of society, there should be no discrepancies in the care given to each person's mortal body during that time. Your leg, my leg, his leg, the President of Earth's leg, Jesus Christ's leg – same difference. Another was practical, and concerned implementation: for many years, hospitals in many places had been run as public nonprofits. All that was necessary now was to take the remainder, which was less than 10% of the

total, and make them public nonprofits as well. There was nothing very difficult about that.

IV

After getting off work and before going to the canteen to eat, Xiao Ming drank half a glass of beer and posted an update to his microblog from his office computer: "Month 11, Day 11 of #MedicalEquality: still a success. Everything good. Not a single flaw."

Xiao Ming had been keeping a daily microblog about medical equality since January 1, 3012. As far as Xiao Ming was concerned, every day of the pilot program had been a success so far. Everything was good. Not a single flaw.

Global cloud computing was old news by this time. You could sit down at any terminal anywhere on the planet and access your most frequently used information services with just a fingerprint or a breath – you couldn't pose as anybody else, and nobody else could pose as you. All content you created, and indeed every aspect of its creation (date, time, location, mood, pace of edits, machine used, and so on), was stored in a cloud data center and instantaneously backed up to two other backup centers 500 kilometers apart from each other to ensure that there would be no loss of data. All of this data was considered top secret: it was between you and the supercomputer. The supercomputer ran regular analyses on all the data you generated, then used the results to make adjustments to your educational and training curricula, work position, or your marital life. What the supercomputer system knew and Xiao Ming didn't was that every single reply

to Xiao Ming's microblog posts was vetted in realtime by a dedicated team, and that no comments depicting the pilot program in a negative light would be shown.

Xiao Ming was the Chief Planetary Medical Director.

Though Xiao Ming's existence as an individual was sheer happenstance, his position in the planetary government was anything but. After analyzing its vast volumes of data, the supercomputer had determined on the basis of 15,000 parameters physiological (including weight, height, blood pressure, blood sugar, body temperature, body hair, bust, waistline, cranial capacity, lung capacity, and penile length and girth), psychological (including anxiety, optimism, desire, calmness, beneficence, and ferocity), intellectual (including math skills, pattern recognition, discrepancy recognition, logical reasoning, creativity, memory, and aptitude), and physical (including the ability to run, jump, toss, eat, drink, whore, and gamble), that out of all the doctors on the planet, Xiao Ming was the most average. His scores placed him precisely at the most central, most mediocre point of the Bell curve. The rationale behind selecting Xiao Ming as the Chief Planetary Medical Director was perfectly clear: the most normal of people would be best equipped to manage the medical system in such a way as to provide the most average medical care to every person.

V

With the full support of the supercomputer and the Municipal Brute Squad behind them, Xiao Ming and his team quickly decided that the first phase of the

pilot program would focus on medical equality among service providers, rather than consumers.

Advances in genetic engineering had long since made it technologically possible to standardize everyone's medical needs starting from the physiological level. Back in the dark ages, when the European and American philosophers and politicians talked about all men being created equal or born equal, they weren't talking about actual equality. Far from it. They only meant that people were equivalent as far as the acts of creation and birth went. Everyone was the product of fucking. Everyone came out of his mother. But modern genetic engineering made it possible to achieve real equality by ensuring through technological means that all babies would be born with completely identical genomes. With that in place, and with the supercomputer providing the computation and resource allocation necessary to guarantee similar nutritional regimes and living environments, everyone would produce an identical demand for medical treatment. After that, health care equality would be a simple matter of methodically imposing planet-wide standards: these vaccinations at this age, circumcisions at this age, appendectomies at that age, hormone supplements at another age, and so on.

But there were no unified genome family planning policies in place, and Earth's population remained far from physiological, psychological, intellectual, or physical equality. Even if such a policy were to be implemented right away, it would still take time: you would need to wait for everyone born before the policy began to die off before you could reach a state in which all people were equal at birth. And there was

something else, which was a major source of concern for Xiao Ming: out of the vast sample set of all the doctors in the world, he had been adjudged the most average. If a unified genome family planning policy were implemented species-wide, with the genome of the most average member of the species serving as a template for all future members, then the resulting babies would probably all come out looking like Xiao Ming. Each baby boy a perfect replica; each baby girl a perfect replica. And once they grew up – gay or straight, it didn’t matter – they would be embracing and sleeping with and fucking perfect replicas of themselves. Xiao Ming’s intelligence levels weren’t quite high enough to think through why it didn’t seem right for everyone on the planet to look like everyone else, but it worried him all the same. He asked the supercomputer about the deeper reasons for his worry: “Why can’t the people of Earth be identical in their physiology and their psychology?” The supercomputer had spent three whole days processing the question, drawing so much electricity that many industrial parks had to ration power or shut down, before displaying its answer: “DUNNO.” It was the first time the supercomputer had said that in its near-century of existence.

Another plan considered by the pilot program, given real-world conditions of physiological inequality, was to reform human psychology and thought processes to standardize human worldviews, philosophies of life, and aesthetic standards, and ensure that people would calmly accept any task assigned to them. Small-scale trials of this plan failed spectacularly. The project team responsible had analyzed all world religions past and present – especially Buddhism, with its emphasis

on calm acceptance of externalities – and on that basis quickly drafted and voted on a standardized worldview and philosophy of life. But even with 90% of the world’s computing resources and mankind’s finest biophysicists and neurologists on the case, no one was able to figure out how to get the standard worldview, life philosophy, and aesthetic sense into people’s heads completely enough to become the sole faith of the species.

One trial had explored artificial conception as a mechanism. A thousand males around 35 years of age with erectile dysfunction took part in a year-long trial in which they were subjected to a combination of cutting-edge neurophysiological interferometry and traditional political re-education techniques aimed at instilling in them the standardized worldviews, life philosophies, and aesthetics. After a year, participants were given a free choice of skin flicks and were observed rubbing themselves. A careful analysis of variables, such as genre of skin flick selected, viewing patterns, modalities of rubbing, and characteristics of incipient orgasms showed that the thousand participants behaved in a thousand different ways. The experiment was repeated twice more, with results indicating that the thousand participants behaved in three thousand different ways – that every one, every time, was different.

VI

Two hundred scholars from the Planetary Academy of Social Sciences offered an alternative for achieving equivalent distribution under unequal conditions:

drawing lots. The supercomputer put the kibosh on that plan before it even got started, displaying on the computer screens of the two hundred planetary science academicians a concise bilingual message:

禽你媽，你們侮辱了我的智商。

THIS IS AN INSULT TO MY INTELLIGENCE. GET FUCKED.

VII

With the joint assistance of neuroscientists, endocrinologists, the supercomputer, and insurance companies, Xiao Ming's project team quickly eliminated all disparities between medical treatment providers around the world.

The project team assigned code numbers for every disease, then set standards for treatment, service quality, and billing associated with each.

Every doctor on the planet got an unusually thorough physical, and the supercomputer installed a cerebral disruptor in all of them. The first generation of cerebral disruptors was limited to overseeing treatment. If a doctor considered performing anything other than the standard treatment, the disruptor would send out a signal after the thought had formed but before the treatment had begun, and representatives of the Municipal Brute Squad would promptly appear. Second-generation disruptors had expanded capabilities that utilized recent findings in the treatment of mental health issues. If a doctor considered performing anything other than the standard treatment, after the thought had formed but before treatment had

begun, the disruptor would automatically deliver an electric shock of sufficient strength to make most doctors fall to the floor and foam at the mouth. The third generation of disruptors added quality-of-service management functionality. A doctor who was too clever or too nimble would get a shock whenever they showed off. The cleverer they were, the nimbler they were, the stronger the shock would be. Foam all over the floor. A doctor who was too thick or too clumsy would get a shock whenever they screwed up. The thicker they were, the clumsier they were, the stronger the shock. Foam all over the floor. Xiao Ming had tried wearing a third-generation disruptor for a while, but he never got shocked once – a sign that he really was the most average of doctors, and that the third-generation disruptor was functioning as expected and deserved wider promotion.

Before long, any Earthling anywhere could go see any doctor anytime, and as long as their illness really was an illness, they would be treated exactly the same as anyone else. Everyone on Earth was finally equal. At least as far as health care was concerned.

VIII

The problems started appearing a year after the pilot program.

The cerebral disruptors had turned out to be extraordinarily effective in disciplining the overly clever, nimble doctors: the quality of their service, which approached the standard ever more closely, belied the tears that could often be observed in their eyes. But the devices had never worked well for the thickos and

the clumsy ones: the more powerful the shock, the more powerful the negative stimulus, the thicker and clumsier they got.

After surveying the situation, the supercomputer directed the project team to draft new quality-of-service standards for each illness code to replace the old ones. The new standards were lower, for the reasons given above, but this did not detract at all from the goal of offering everyone everywhere the same quality of medical treatment.

On the winter solstice of 3012, Xiao Ming was relieved of his duties as Chief Planetary Medical Director. The supercomputer's latest calculations had found that he was no longer the most average doctor. As he was being relieved of his duties, Xiao Ming was fitted with a cerebral disruptor. It shocked him three times that afternoon as he was performing a routine oophorectomy. He fell to the floor, foaming at the mouth.

But any Earthling anywhere could go see any doctor anytime, and as long as their illness really was an illness, they would be treated exactly the same as anyone else. The pilot program continued to be a success.

IX

Once treatment standards were lowered to a certain level, all major pharmaceutical corporations and medical equipment companies disbanded their R&D divisions and shifted their focus to producing medicines and equipment in strict compliance with the lower planetary standards.

After treatment standards were lowered, there was a global pandemic of patients beating doctors bloody.

After consulting with the project team, the supercomputer mandated that all doctors take part in on-the-job training courses: "50-Meter Shuttle Runs" and "Self-Defense for Doctors." "Self-Defense for Doctors" was planned and designed by the most accomplished martial arts masters on Earth. It was a distillation of Wing Chun, Taekwondo, street-fighting, and mixed martial arts.

Translated by Brendan O'Kane



劉震雲

Liu Zhenyun

Liu Zhenyun has his finger firmly on the pulse of China's cities. His award-winning stories explore life in China's state-owned companies and bureaucratic offices, but his most celebrated novel, *My Name is Liu Yuejin* (translated into English as *The Cook, the Crook, and the Real Estate Tycoon*), tells the story of a migrant worker who has his bag (and all his worldly possessions) stolen in Beijing. Liu's cold humor, his broad familiarity with urban society, and his modern sensibilities have made him a favorite among Chinese readers. His other English publications include *Cell Phone* and *I Did Not Kill My Husband*.

Liu Zhenyun: Always Returning to Square One

Interviewed by Shu Jinyu

Most of the time, Liu Zhenyun plays things cool, even when he's being funny. Immersed in his own world, his gaze is composed – sometimes looking at you, sometimes staring off at something in the distance. If no one else is around, it can seem as though he's speaking to himself. In ordinary conversation, Liu probably invents dialogue more than any other author. He will casually create a conversation between two people, including someone from Shanghai, Beijing or any number of places, but the other person is always from Henan. He will even use different dialects (not necessarily accurately) to complete the dialogue, and then talk and talk until finally a sentence somewhere in the middle will bring you back to the original subject, and you'll realize he's taken you on an interesting though extended detour. You're perfectly happy to follow him through his maze of language, and when you arrive at your destination, you'll wish you were still on the journey.

This is Liu's charm, bringing fun to any occasion. When you listen to his stories and can follow them, you'll laugh knowingly, and even when you can't quite follow along, you'll still be fascinated by his performance. One of his pet phrases is “and when *that* happened, then...” Whenever he says that, the plot is about to thicken. He's an author who knows how to write a story and how to tell one. The success of mov-

ies like *Party A and Party B*, *Cell Phone*, and *My Name is Liu Yuejin* won him a place among the “film writers” of the China Film Group. He might be considered an official author of New Year blockbusters.

So why Liu Zhenyun? I've puzzled over this question for some time.

Liu is an ordinary man who doesn't need a job and who keeps a pretty relaxed lifestyle. He gets up at 6:30 each morning and jogs for an hour and a half before writing for two hours. In the afternoon, he writes for another two and a half hours, and then goes to bed at 9:30pm. When he isn't writing, he reads, and if he wants to see people, he goes to the market and chats with the friends he's made there. He likes people who know how to live, something that has nothing to do with their profession. He's befriended a plump fruit vender, who sometimes asks him to help move fruit boxes and occasionally invites him behind the stand for fresh dumplings. Liu has also made friends with a cobbler from Hunan. The cobbler wears gloves when he's repairing shoes, and when he's done fixing a zipper he'll lubricate it with soap, showing respect for his work. When Liu renovated his house, he made friends with a mason called Mr. Zhao, who always told him what he was really thinking: “For someone who sells stones like me, all we've got is what we really think.” That moved Liu Zhenyun, and at that moment he felt like the richest man in the world.

He is also not an ordinary man at all. He bought twenty copies of *The Analects*, and can summarize Confucius's three most important characteristics: "First of all, Confucius was a mean man. Before, I thought he was a kind man, but he actually wasn't. When Confucius said 'what a delight it would be if a distant friend could visit', he meant that he didn't have anything to say to the people around him. Mean people have analytical minds, and behind the meanness is a pity for others. So perhaps mean people are the kindest people. Second, Confucius was a great writer and a great thinker. He didn't talk about simple things in complex terms; rather, he talked about complex things in simple terms, and that in itself is extraordinary. I used to think that great masters talk about simple things in complex terms, but now I realize that only students do that. Third, Confucius talked around things until his original point is totally unclear. I've thought about these three characteristics a lot."

I don't know if Liu Zhenyun will offend his friends with the claim that *A Word is Worth Ten Thousand Words* is an important book. But listening to his stories, I know that it comes from the bottom of his heart, and surely it's what history will conclude as well. A brief summary of a work can be given from many different angles, such as the information it presents, or its attitude toward the world, or its emotional content. But in giving a summary of *A Word is Worth Ten Thousand Words*, Liu tells it from the angle of plot: there are two murderers, and one really wants to find the other

so he can have a heart-to-heart talk with him.

A friend isn't someone who will loan you money when you're broke; it's someone whose attitude toward the world and life is the same as yours, and with whom you share a tacit understanding. Liu told me that it isn't easy to find a real friend. The biggest difference between a society that has gods and a society that only has humans is that in the former there's another place where you can go to confide. Perhaps gods don't exist and perhaps they're everywhere, but when you're in pain, or worried, or guilty, gods give you a place to go. In China, if you're guilty or worried, there's no God to go to. All you can do is find a close friend to confide in. "It isn't easy to find someone to talk to." A god won't betray you, but friends will change so much they're no longer friends, and if they reveal what you've said, they become a knife stuck in your chest. So sometimes close friends are dangerous.

The idea that "one word can be worth ten thousand words" comes from something Lin Biao said in 1966, and forty-three years later, Liu used it as the title of a book. Why? Liu told me: "When I say that sentence today, it's different from the way Mr. Lin used it. He was using it in a political context for political aims, while I'm referring to life. The people in my book, like the tofu vendor, the barber, the butcher, the donkey seller, the funeral singer, the cloth dyer, the food stall owner, and the killers who set out with their knives... I speak to them sincerely." He continued on to explain that Vice Chairman Lin didn't invent the saying. It is the kind of ancient expression that's been

around for a millennium. For example, “A little knowledge can overcome a thousand years of stupidity,” or “One word can define the universe,” or “A few words from a great man is better than ten years of study.” What’s important is the “a little knowledge,” and “one word,” and so on.

In *A Word is Worth Ten Thousand Words*, Yang Baishun and Niu Aiguo are both made to wear the “green hat” of a cuckold. They aren’t at fault; it’s their wives who are the problem. When Yang Baishun and Niu Aiguo discover that their wives are cheating on them, they set out to kill the other men. But when they find them, they discover that the problem isn’t with their rivals, it’s in themselves. They have sewn their green hats themselves. They realize that the hat is just a symbol, and although it appears to be a problem between a man and a woman, the roots are somewhere else. They have nothing to say to their wives, and their wives found other men to talk to. The conversation between adulterers flows like a river. They can talk all night without stopping: “Should we talk about something else?” “We can talk about anything.” From the perspective of conversation and lack of conversation, the men who made Yang and Niu wear green hats had actually done the right thing. And when they realize that, they slip their knives back into their pockets.

“With respect to the relationship between a man and a woman, he should kill his wife. But from the perspective of conversation, on an intellectual level, she did the right thing.” Liu Zhenyun said that he had let the wives get off inadvertently, but it was because

he had shifted perspective. He had adopted a public point of view, and from a nihilistic perspective, the lovers had broken free of all fetters and rules, and rediscovered the moral baseline of humanity. They dashed ahead heedless of their own safety, crossing mountains and oceans to be together, and in so doing, they were heroes.

Writing circles, TV circles, media circles – Liu Zhenyun moves among them smoothly. He is good with other people, and seems never to be the subject of ugly gossip or reports. Although there has been some controversial criticism, it has been criticism of his work. Even so, though he has friends everywhere, Liu is a lonely man. When he tells me that he finds friends in his writing, I sense his sadness. He’s like a child playing with building blocks, and once he’s built something, he pulls it down and builds it again, lost in the construction of his own little world. Whether he’s lonely or content with his lot, no one knows.

“Writing a novel is a process of making friends. When I wrote *A Chicken Feather*, I got to know Xiao Lin, and he told me that if a piece of tofu goes bad, he doesn’t throw it out. That’s more important than the leader of the Eight Country Alliance. It’s a big thing. When I wrote *Cell Phone*, Yan Shou asked me, Do you think it’s okay to lie? I said it isn’t. Yan Shou said, You’re wrong. It’s not truth that keeps our lives going, it’s lies. Every day, every minute, every second. When I wrote *My Name is Liu Yuejin*, Liu Yuejin asked me, Do wolves eat sheep or do sheep eat wolves? I said he

was being ridiculous, of course wolves eat sheep. But Liu Yuejin said I was wrong! On Chang'an Avenue in Beijing, he'd seen sheep eating wolves. Sheep are herbivores, but when there are a lot of sheep and each one spits, the wolves will die. When I wrote *A Word is Worth Ten Thousand Words*, Yang Baishun and Niu Aiguo told me, Friends can be dangerous, and sincere speech can be treacherous. I said that made sense, since I've had a taste of it myself." Liu Zhenyun told me that the greatest attraction that writing has for an author is that the author can find close friends in the book. "These friends aren't the same as friends in real life. The ones in the book are unfailingly patient, and you could say they're my closest friends. Whenever I seek them out, they're there waiting for me." This is the reason he writes.

"I've always tried to stay in touch with people I know from literary circles and other parts of my life. I don't like to do things halfway. You have to throw yourself into finding friends in books, and keep adjusting the relationship between your literary life and yourself."

Liu attributes his unique way of thinking and talking to the fact that he has the ability to mull over a question for a very long time. In this respect, he was directly influenced by his maternal grandmother.

"My grandmother had a huge influence on me. She was only a meter and a half tall, but when she was young, she was a star in my hometown, as famous as Julia Roberts. Julia Roberts is an actress, so it's not

surprising she became famous. My grandmother had a harder time getting famous, since she was just a hired worker. When she went out to harvest wheat, she would cut wheat for three *li* without standing up. She would make a lot of money, and everyone wanted to sign her, like the soccer star Ronaldo. My grandmother said, 'You know why I'm so fast? I don't stand up. If you straighten up once, you'll want to straighten up twice, and if you do it twice, you'll do it twenty times. I know that if I'm going to do a job, I have to just bend down and get it done. So that way I can cut wheat faster than all the others.'"

"Really good writers are first and foremost thinkers." Liu told me that experience is the most basic way to measure a writer. "Writers work with the same strategies, so the test is not in their writing, but in what they do before they sit down to write: whether they get something out of an ordinary life that others don't. It's whether an author's experience is different. All good authors have had experiences that others don't have."

In taking the measure of an author, it's important to look at whether he or she has the ability to mull over a problem for a long time. Liu explained that this kind of thinking has two levels: the first is holistic. Before you start writing, you have to decide how deep the book is going to be and how long it's going to be. Thinking about it for two days is going to be different from thinking about it for two months, and thinking about it for two months is different from thinking about it for two years. The second kind of

thinking involves concrete details, characters, scenes, and conversations. There's also another kind of long-term thinking, which is a consideration of your whole creative oeuvre, since you don't want to be too scattershot. "When I finished *A Chicken Feather* and then wrote *A Duck Feather*, readers and critics alike enjoyed them. But I wanted to change things up... If you want to write well, you have to be thinking before and during the writing process. Then when you're done, it's very important to forget it all quickly. It's like climbing another mountain, you have to start from the beginning. You have to always go back to square one, which I do in life as well as in my writing. I'm used to starting over. So I believe I can keep producing good work."

People often ask Liu how he came to write *My Name Is Liu Yuejin* (translated into English under the title *The Cook, the Crook and the Real Estate Tycoon*). He doesn't answer directly. Instead, he says: "I often use 'traveling together to Bianliang' as an example. Two people meet at a street corner. One says, 'Where you going, friend?' It turns out they're both going to Bianliang. They smoke and chat and they get along, so they decide to travel together. They walk and walk, and start to feel familiar, so they start to talk about things that bother them. They tell a few secrets. When they get to Bianliang, one is heading east and one is heading west, so they shake hands and go their separate ways. After many years, they think of each other, and maybe one of them knocks his pipe and thinks,

'Whatever happened to old Liu?'"

For Liu Zhenyun, this kind of meeting isn't random. *A Chicken Feather*, *Return to 1942*, *My Hometown Noodles and Flowers*, *A Load of Bullshit*, and *My Name Is Liu Yuejin* were each created in different stages of Liu's creative process. Walking along, he came upon Xiao Lin. Sometime later down the road, he encountered three million disaster victims. Walking a bit farther, he found a bunch of dreamers, and walking to where he is today, he met Liu Yuejin. These meetings aren't random strikes. Outsiders might think the changes are sudden, but they seem necessary to Liu. It is a function of his particular creativity.

Writing *Return to 1942* made Liu aware of the importance of "traveling together to Bianliang." "I met a friend who wanted to compile a history of a century of disasters. One of them was the 1942 drought in Henan, when three million people starved to death. Since I'm from Henan, I felt a responsibility to investigate, so I went to talk to some people who had survived the disaster. I asked my grandmother what had happened that year. She said, 'Which year?' I said the year all those people starved to death. She said, 'There were a lot of years when people starved. Which one are you talking about?' And in an instant, the disaster turned into something different: a kind of forgetting. You don't know many people died in your family? It's been forgotten. I felt frightened, the forgetting shocked me. That feeling was much more important than the investigation I'd started with." From then on, he'd started to encounter "traveling partners" that he

could become friends with.

When he finished writing *A Chicken Feather*, no one expected him to write about a deadly famine. Liu Yunzhen's creative orbit won't continue on in the same direction after *My Name is Liu Yuejin*. "I have other projects that wouldn't occur to other people. What's surprising is that it's not just important for readers, it's important for me as well."

When you've spent some time with Liu Zhenyun, you'll realize that he is someone who is very good at mulling over questions and finding answers. He is an author who likes to learn. He told me sincerely: "I'm not being modest when I say I really don't understand a lot about the world. If you don't know much, but you pretend to know a lot, it's easy to be left hanging. I don't understand a lot of things my friends say. But after I study something, I can understand it. 'Among three people, I'll find a teacher' – for me, among two people, I'll find a teacher. To recognize people's faults isn't useful, but recognizing their strengths can be. Who's a thief? Liu Zhenyun is a thief. He learns things from other people, which is a kind of nourishment." So, if Liu has the time, he will sit down with anyone to chat.

In the movie version of *Party A and Party B*, Liu plays the part of a frustrated youth, and in *My Name is Liu Yuejin* he plays the half-hidden yawner. Although he appears in only a few scenes, he learned a tremendous amount from it. "My greatest realization was that movie dialogue is really lively. Dialogue in fiction

tends to be sequential: 'Have you eaten?' 'Yeah.' 'What did you have?' 'Stewed pork.' Movie dialogue isn't the same. For example, in answer to 'What did you have?' the answer might be 'That guy Zhang is a real asshole!' And after that it might be, 'Li's had a lot going on these past few days.' There's a lot of concentrated information communicated there, and it's really lively too. If you replicate that in a novel, it's even more lively. It's good to learn from places other than books.

"I also got something else out of it, which was to come into contact with people I wouldn't otherwise get to know, like directors, actors, cinematographers, the prop guys. I'd never met people like that before. Since they're in a different profession from me, they talk and work differently too. That was useful for me in two ways. One is that it gave me a broader understanding of life, and the other is that it made me realize that everyone is a philosopher. The props guys, the extras... you can't underestimate them. The way they think about the world can be very enlightening.

"When I was at the *Farmer's Daily*, I got to know a proofreader called Yao. We were good friends, and he was a philosopher. He loved to point out mistakes I made in my writing, and each time he was very serious about it. I said, 'You're not a proofreader, you're a rewriter.' He taught me a lot about life. For example, never go shopping when you're hungry, because it's easy to buy too much. You save money if you eat before you go. I've tried it, and it's really true."

When Liu reads, he gets something out of it that others don't. He divides books into three categories:

one kind is like hot water, and since it's just a replica of life, it's not obligatory reading; one kind is like liquor, and it will deform you if you take too much of it; the last kind is like pure alcohol or like yeast, and that's the best kind. Such books aren't finished when an author is done writing, nor when a reader is done reading. It's only half done. Only after many years, when it's read for the second time and the author and reader have a sincere communication, will the book finally be done. "There used to be a saying, *the skill is not found in the poem*, and that's true for books as well. *The Analects* isn't very long, so why is it hard to understand? Because there's so much outside of the words themselves, and the more you read the more is revealed. So the book requires a tremendous effort on the part of the reader, and that means the collision between reader and writer can't be completed in one reading. A good book isn't finished by the author alone. It's a spark for the reader's own thinking and feeling. That kind of book is really where an author and a reader can finish a work together. When a reader finishes a book, that's when the real reading begins. That's the best state to read a book in."

In *A Word is Worth Ten Thousand Words*, an Italian Catholic priest comes to a county in Henan to give religious teachings. In the forty years he is there, he produces eight converts. One day, the priest meets a butcher and tries to convert him. The priest asks, Do you believe in God? The butcher says, No, what good would it do me? The priest says, God will help you understand who you are, where you come from, and

where you're going. The butcher says, I already know that I'm a butcher, I come from Zhang Village, and I'm going to Li Village to butcher a pig. The priest thinks for a long time before saying, What you say is right. Then he says, But you can't say you've never once felt grief. The butcher says, Of course I've felt grief. The priest says, When you feel that way, if you don't go to God, who do you go to? The butcher says, What could God tell me anyway? The priest says, If you believe in God, the first thing God will tell you is that you're a sinner. The butcher gets upset and says, I haven't so much as bummed a cigarette from him! How can he say I'm a bad person if we've never even met? After the priest dies, the butcher looks at the blueprints of a church the priest had designed. It was an enormous church, with stained glass windows and exquisite pews. The butcher feels the church bells thundering and all of the windows are open, and he senses the windows inside himself opening as well. At that moment, he knows that the priest was the best preacher in the world...

"To give 'teachings' to my friends is one of the standards I try to live up to. But I don't give my 'teachings' to Sinologists and critics." Liu Zhenyun believes that only by touching the people he cares about can he win recognition from the world.

Translated by Eleanor Goodman



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Di An

Di An, the daughter of two well-known authors, Li Rui and Jiang Yun, began writing in 2002, and her first novella *Sister's Forest* appeared in *Harvest* magazine. Her first novel, *Farewell to Heaven*, followed in 2005. In 2009 she became a best-selling author when the novel *City of the Dragon I* sold over 700,000 copies, and earned her a Most Promising Newcomer award at the Chinese Literature Media awards. Her most recent novel, *Ling Yang in the South*, finds her departing from fantasy and exploring historical fiction. She currently edits the bimonthly magazine *ZUI Found*.

Beyond the Western Pass

By Di An

I know that my end of days is this day, is right now. I'm already old, in my last years of life. I talk less and less, because no one understands me when I do. I'm surrounded more and more frequently by random strangers. They ask: "Do you remember me? Do you recognize me?" Are you kidding? Why should I recognize them? So they straighten up and say with real or pretend sadness, "She doesn't recognize anyone." A calm male voice replies: "That's senility for you." I turn around in annoyance: "Who are you calling senile?" The calm voice remains calm, and continues: "She thinks she's nineteen again."

He's wrong. He's making it up. Just yesterday morning I remembered with total clarity things that happened when I was sixty. I can clearly recall one evening of that year: an endless highway at night, dotted with streetlights on both sides. Although sixty may already be long gone, I'm not just some Alzheimer's patient trying to believe she's nineteen – yes, let us use the disease's official name, not "senile." I know perfectly well that I'm very old. All the smooth-skinned young women in their pretty poses must think I'm a monster. The man with the calm, assured voice calls me "Mom," which is the most absurd thing I've ever heard. Just a minute ago, I said to him: "When I'm dead, please put that picture of me at twenty-four on the gravestone." (See? I remember more than just being nineteen.) He looked at me suspiciously. Then I remembered that when I was twenty-four, he didn't exist – if what he says is true, and I gave birth to him. So I explained: "That picture I took when I was young, in Amsterdam. I was wearing a white blouse

and standing next to the tulips." That is my absolute favorite picture, because it was taken when I was in my prime, and at my prettiest. To me, Amsterdam is frozen in a moment that is already a half century gone. Like the northern industrial city where I was born and raised, it exists now only as a clutter of disconnected episodes of memory. For instance: I can't remember what tulips look like, but I'll never forget the houseboats that floated in those narrow dikes. People lived in them. Only when memory turns fragmented and illogical does it become truly reliable, an integral part of a person's spirit. This is something a person cannot possibly realize while they are young.

Yet the tranquil stranger in front of me smiled and said: "Mom," – God, that word makes me angry – "that's impossible. No one puts a picture of when they were young on their grave." Forget it, forget it. People on the brink of death like me have one advantage: we no longer hold our hopes out for anything.

I've fallen asleep again; I'm dreaming, again. As I lose consciousness I hear the tranquil stranger say to a guest: "I'm really sorry, could you come again tomorrow, thank you for the flowers, she sleeps over ten hours a day now, just like a baby – if you come before lunch tomorrow, you might catch her awake, though of course, even if she is awake she may not recognize you."

Every time I fall asleep, the blue horse enters my dream and summons me to go. I follow it, and we run together; for this old body of mine to feel that light, floating step is exhilarating almost to the point of terror. I have always reacted to ecstasy with fear, since

I was a child, like I were getting something I didn't deserve. But no one is interested in my childhood anymore. People frequently lack imagination, and are unwilling to conceive of an old person having had a childhood. The blue horse is beautiful: it is the grey-blue color of the earth and sky in the minutes just before sunrise. There are subtle streaks of red in its mane and tail, as if it were cut whole-cloth out of the dawn.

In this dream I am always nineteen. Why, I don't know. But I don't scrutinize anything closely anymore. The blue horse is so kind to me, and when it looks at me with those huge, limpid eyes, I remember what it feels like to be a young woman. "Young woman" isn't a noun or a rhetorical device, let alone an excuse for narcissism – it is the undeniably genuine feeling that one could be carried away by the energy of one's spirit at any moment. I'm nineteen, and I'm wearing the clothes I wore that year: a bright red dress. The color and cut are absolutely horrible, but that isn't important, because youth is always disarrayed. When you're no longer in disarray, your cleanest days are past. The blue horse smiles – don't ask me how a horse could smile, I just know it was smiling – and says: "Do you like the way you look now, my dear?" It looks at me, eyes as soft as water and sad as ice. The breath from its nostrils tickles my ear and cheek. As it gives a coquettish toss of its mane I am struck with the truth: I finally understand why I am always nineteen when I am here, and who the horse is.

Nineteen was the year I started writing stories. You could say that that was the year my life truly began; you could also say that was the year I said goodbye to a real life. This horse, this blue horse, represents my stories.

When I was young, the books I wrote were read by other young people. Now they are all old, and so am I. I have no strength left for writing, nor they for reading. Thus history surreptitiously ends one cycle and begins another.

The blue horse steals on in its noiseless gallop. A nineteen-year-old me in a horrid red dress sits on his back. We flee through the dream of the dying. "You know you're going to die?" it asks. I reply: "Will you die with me?" It laughs drily. "Good God, you haven't changed at all. Still as selfish and overbearing as ever."

Even in my nineteen-year-old body I can feel that I am near the end. I am losing the power of thought, and of language, which is to say that I'm losing all capability to interact with the world. So my final hour is arriving, and the blue horse comes to find me.

I can no longer remember any detail of my relationship with my stories. I only know that we were inseparable for a long time – you could even say we kept each other alive. The blue horse's body heat effaces all memory of hardship. He carries me over great distances – yes, I can still remember, my stories and I traveled a long, hard road together. And I remember that that road got more and more desolate.

"Is there an end or not?" I ask the blue horse.

He chuckles softly. "How should I know? I was going to ask you."

"If I told you that I didn't know if there were an end, would you still be willing to go with me?" Was that really my voice? My voice at nineteen really was clear, and full of that uncertainty peculiar to the young.

"Are you kidding?" It turns to look at me. "Obviously, you're the one who's sticking to me no matter what. I can't get rid of you. What a headache." It bats



Illustration by Wang Yan

its eyelashes at me. I am suddenly caught in a storm of recollection.

I leave all my hopes to the sound of earthly applause; I leave all my tears to the men I once loved; I leave all my worries to my departed parents and the son I no longer recognize, and I leave all my happiness and disappointment to this beaten, scarred, and leaky thing called life. I have absolutely nothing to say to the world. All elegant affectations are exercises in futility, all great beliefs and profound emotions are mirages and delusion. I want nothing but to continue this tireless sprint with the blue horse, because in life I gave what came from the deepest recesses of my soul to my writing – it wasn't hope, nor sorrow, nor worry nor joy nor disappointment nor any kind of love or hate. Humanity hasn't devised a word for it yet, which is why it can remain so distinct and soft, without any trace of having been invaded by language.

Over this road that is my life, the blue horse and I pass by an abandoned railway station, an old smelt-

ing factory, and countless gravestones in the rain. The petals of fresh flowers fall as they wish onto the names of the dead. Then there is emptiness, without even graveyards. The flat, red earth cracks. At the horizon, a peach blossom opens in a howl of color, yet it is forever unapproachable. I do not ask the blue horse where we are, it merely asks me: "Are you sure you want to keep going?" I respond: "I'm sure." Of course, I'm terrified, fear sweeps through me like a wind, but when one has no sense of direction, what is there to do but advance? To turn around and go back is what takes real courage.

"Our water is almost gone." I say to the blue horse.

It smiles kindly, and says: "I'm fine. I can live without eating or drinking. Save it all for yourself."

The sky darkens. Evening on the plain is cold. The blue horse lies gracefully on one side, and I snuggle against it, my arms wrapped tightly around its belly for warmth. This is when I notice the priest.

He sits on the bare earth not far from me, his black cassock covered with dust, his lips so dry and cracked they bleed, yet with a look of peace in his eyes.

He watches me for a long interval.

"Come with me," he says. "I can see you yearn for the religious life."

I say: "No."

"Why not?" asks the priest. "I'll take you to Heaven. I know the way."

I hesitate. The blue horse tilts its head to look at me. "I certainly don't know the way. Go with whom-ever you'd like."

I give all the water I have with me to the priest. I am sincere. I say to him: "Please forgive me. I don't think I'll be going to Heaven. At least, not right now."

He brushes the dust from his robe, smiles, and leaves us. "You sure are stubborn," sighs the blue horse.

"Will I die of thirst?" I ask the horse. It replies: "If you die, I'll just keep going. I'll run into someone else like you eventually, and take them with me; then, when they die, I'll go on alone again. It's incredibly liberating."

I smile. "How heartbreaking." It replies: "Not exactly. If you were to live forever, I would have to die; only by your death am I able to stay alive."

"So we're enemies?" I ask. It considers the question, then says: "Not exactly. Even though I exchange your death for my own survival, I also warm your memory of living."

It reared and gave a long, alluring whinny that startled a few crows by the horizon. "Come on, get on my back. I'll make a bet with you: I'll carry you straight in a random direction, and see if I can't bring you out." I lie down on its back, and it resumes his

noiseless gallop. Its hooves kick up thick grains of sand that sting my face. I close my eyes, and whisper in its ear: "Maybe we'll even find a river, and some evidence of life." It laughs at me gently. "What signs of life? This barren plain we're on right now is your own dying mind. The only sign of life is this adolescent image of you in a red dress. Do you still not understand?"

At some point, I'm not sure when, it pulls up. The stop is so sudden it almost jolts me off his back. We stand in front of a battlefield fresh with slaughter. Blood runs in rivers; the sun slips in by accident and is stained red. The eye can see nothing but mangled corpses. What were once strong, nimble arms hang from the dead branch of a tree. My blue horse accidentally steps in a dying charger's eye socket. I shiver, and say: "Let's go. You've brought me to the only place that could be worse than a wasteland."

"Have I?" The blue horse smiles as it stares at the head of a general, beached on the sand banks of the blood river. "Do you not recognize it? This bloodied battlefield is really just your attachment to the world."

Night falls. I am dizzy with thirst. I had thought that this young dream-body would be resilient, since it is no more than a spirit. Sadly, I was wrong. I am still fragile. "What a pity," I smile weakly, "I can't go with you any farther. But I want to ask you: if you've known so many like me already, have you ever taken anyone all the way out? Can you tell me what's at the end of the wasteland?"

The horse lowers its proud, beautiful head, and tenderly licks my face. Just as my hearing evaporates into mist, I think I hear it say, "If you want to get out..." Then I hear no more. My red dress melts away.

Then I wake up. Everything around me feels strange. The tranquil stranger walks over and says:

“Mom, you’re awake.” I still don’t recognize him. But I suddenly know what it is I have to do.

The tranquil stranger takes me for a stroll in the park. It isn’t really a “stroll,” of course – I just sit in the wheelchair and sunbathe. He bends down to button my sweater for me. With a smile he says: “Mom, you’re just as pretty as you were at nineteen.” He’s lying. But I like to hear it anyway. I stare without blinking at a cold drinks vendor in front of us: rainbow-dazzling mounds of shaved ice shine in the clown’s hand like the shouts of children. “Mom, do you want some shaved ice?” He laughs and shakes his head. “Ma, you really have turned back into a child. All right, wait just a second.” His silhouette gets smaller as he walks away and then stops in front of the clown. I propel my wheelchair as fast as I can into a stand of trees. Here the land falls away in an apocalyptic slope of vertiginous steepness.

A child is standing in front of my wheelchair, looking at me with a clear curiosity. “Be a good boy and do something for me,” I say. “Help me out and that nice man will give you shaved ice.” He nods and says, “OK.”

I say: “Push me as fast as you can, and when we get to this hill, let go. It’s simple. You’ll do this for me, won’t you?” He is quiet for a moment, then his face twists in a crafty smile and I catch a familiar flash of blue in his eyes. “You’re here,” I say.

“I’m here.” His voice is so soft, his tone of voice so old.

“Let’s go, then.”

The scenery around me begins to blur. The wind at my ears is wonderfully crisp and cool. I close my eyes to enjoy this incredible speed, ignoring the alarmed cries of people around me. As the pace quickens, I feel like I’m a child again, going down a slide:

time flows backwards. The first time I sensed my death was near was at the funeral of my best friend; torrential rain on the day my child’s child was born, and the strange, grey lights in the hospital; the doctor saying to me, “Congratulations, you’re pregnant!” and hearing a strange buzzing in my ear, like an insect about to be entombed in amber; the tranquil stranger’s father and I building a fire beneath a pale *aurora borealis* at New Year, the sparks that hovered in the endless waste representing all of life’s illusions; the smell of fresh grass in the summer of my seventeenth year; losing a red balloon when I was small, and my mother saying, “Don’t cry, honey, Mommy will buy you a new one...” Then comes a loud bang, then darkness; then I begin to fly, I transform into a beam of light. In this moment, I realize what it was the blue horse had said to me at the end of my dream: “If you want to get out, you have to learn not to hold on to the illusion of ‘I’.” But there is no time for me to put this into a novel; I am no longer I; I am a beam of light.

This is what I want to leave to the world. My horse, my stories and I have already drunk our last cup of wine. Death is no great event. I have gone beyond the Western pass, and have no need for familiar faces.

Translated by Canaan Morse



曹文軒

Cao Wenxuan

The works of Cao Wenxuan, one of China's most popular authors of children's fiction, are typically set in the China of the 1950s and 60s, and feature children and animals as their main characters. Titles such as *Thatched Houses* and *Bronze and Sunflower* have collectively sold millions of copies in China, and Cao has won most of China's prizes available to children's authors. His reputation abroad is on the rise, with a nomination for the Hans Christian Andersen Award, and the publication of titles including *Bronze and Sunflower* in English.

Crows

By Cao Wenxuan

In China, the crow has always had rather a bad reputation. It's a sinister bird, a harbinger of misfortune. In Chinese films it's always there in the bleak wilderness, or the shadow-strewn graveyard, or on the branch of a lone gnarled tree behind an old residence. The moment it utters that single cry, so shrill and hoarse, a sense of danger, of terror, rushes through us.

Exactly what it is about the crow we can't say for sure. But it's one of those things that we feel very distant from, to the extent that perhaps none of us could describe accurately its physique, the look in its eyes, or the way it flies or walks. Instead, we have an impression of a mass of pure black, of a chill, dark spirit drifting on the horizon.

As a boy, I became aware at a very early age of a feeling, a need to protect ourselves from the treacherousness of crows. And so, whenever I came across one standing on top of a windmill or flying silently out of the woods, I would immediately spit on the ground and close my eyes.

When I was in sixth grade, I pulled from my father's bookshelf a copy of Lu Xun's *Old Tales Retold*, and found the story "Flight to the Moon", in which Yi the archer shoots all the birds until there are only crows left, and then has to shoot them too in order to make *zhajiang* noodles for Chang'e, his beautiful wife. The story made my skin crawl, made me feel sick to my stomach. Was crow meat edible? Chang'e may have eaten crow-meat *zhajiang* noodles every day without bristling or gagging like me, but it seemed she wasn't very happy about it: "Crow-meat *zhajiang*

noodles again! Who on earth eats only crow-meat *zhajiang* noodles all year round?" When I read about Chang'e abandoning Yi, leaving home and flying off to the moon, I completely understood why: how could anyone bear to eat nothing but crow-meat *zhajiang* noodles? To be honest, at the time I didn't have much sympathy for Yi, who was left all alone. How much sympathy can you have for a man who's made his beautiful wife eat crow-meat *zhajiang* noodles all year long?

To cut a long story short, I've always had a rather bad feeling about crows.

Then, in October 1993 I went to Tokyo University to give a series of lectures. I was there for eighteen months, and it was during that time that my impression of crows changed.

It seems that the crow doesn't have such a bad image in Japanese culture. I heard that in Japanese folklore there were moving stories about crows rescuing princes. And in these stories the crow is a good bird, a brave and wise bird. Clearly, the Japanese don't have a problem with crows, unlike the Chinese, who can't see a crow without fearing the worst. For the Japanese, a crow is just a bird, a regular kind of bird, and there's nothing particularly good or bad about it. They treat these spirits of darkness like any other bird, entirely normally.

At first, I was very disconcerted to see crows flying all over the place in Tokyo. Why were these birds allowed the freedom to do as they liked? And when I heard one caw shortly before I was due to give my first lecture, my heart sank. I had set out from my accom-



Illustration by Wang Yan

modation in my sharply pressed Western-style suit, attaché case under my arm – I was quite the picture. I had been telling myself that this first lecture needed to be good, really good. I had been building up my confidence. Then, about a hundred metres from my accommodation, I heard a rasp across the clear sky, and was aware of a black shadow slipping in front of the sun above me. Before I could glance up, there was another

rasp, this time by my ear, and a crow flashed before my eyes and flew off into the forest. I barely knew what was happening, and instinctively spat on the ground, just as I had done as a child. For the next few days I was anxious, until I was sure that the lecture had been fine.

I couldn't avoid the crows in Tokyo, and as the days and months passed, my initial sensitivity was

gradually dulled, and my prejudice towards crows steadily reduced.

For a start, the crows in Tokyo are neither wary nor afraid of people, which means that you can't keep your distance. They are everywhere: whatever you are looking at it, they seem to be in the picture. If we wanted to go shopping in Kichijōji, we had to go through Inokashira Park, which is a big base camp for crows. There are so many of them, and they are so brazen in the way they sweep across the ground, and peck for food around your feet. It's impossible to wave them away. The crow walks with a swagger, as though demanding your attention: You think you know me? Take a closer look.

Reading a crow is an entirely passive activity, but it has its rewards, not least the casting aside of all sorts of cultural associations. It's not easy to see beyond the bird that has been the symbol of Nazism and appreciate its aesthetic beauty.

And that black is truly black! As black as ink, as black as lacquer, as black as the dark night unlit by moon and stars. Yet, there is a sheen to it, and when the crow takes flight, it shimmers like satin in sunlight. Its beak, of the same hard material as the ox's horn, looks majestic. And those eyes make you feel that your earlier impression was simply unjustified: two brown-black eyes, tiny beans, shiny beads, without a hint of malevolence or hatred. On the contrary, there is an

innocence, a warmth, even a degree of the affinity that one finds only in the good, kind eyes of the elderly. Now, what if we were to picture this same crow, standing, black as can be, in the glistening snow? Or, this same crow, black as can be, weaving through a shower of cherry blossom? How would we respond then? When the crow steps forward, it doesn't walk, it skips. In the past I thought that crows waddled along like ducks, but I discovered that instead of taking steps, the crow skips along with quite a sense of rhythm. And if the crow is startled when pecking at food, it will cock its head and look up with a slightly idiotic expression.

It's particularly rewarding to watch crows fly. There are always flocks of pigeons and wild ducks flying above Inokashira Park. Watching the pigeons fly was mesmerising (as a boy, I would lose myself watching pigeons), but there were also elements of performance. They flew, and wheeled in the air, and rose and fell as suddenly as a whirlwind, and were so reluctant to take a rest that you felt they were showing off. By contrast, watching the wild ducks flying was monotonous. They flew in straight lines, in perfect formation, without exception, and with their long necks and short bodies, it was not easy to see any beauty in their flying. And their descent could only be described as clumsy: when they landed on water, they did so with the grace and elegance of bricks, splatting and glugging one after another.

But crows don't fly like pigeons, and they certainly don't fly like wild ducks. There is no wheeling about in the sky and no interest in showing off. Crows just want to fly, and they fly well and with style. What they like best, it seems, is flying with purpose: from one tree to another, from the TV aerial to the top of the electricity pole, from the ground up to the tree, or from the tree down to the ground. Between take-off and landing, a crow will stretch out its wings in its own unaffected way. But when a crow mid-flight decides at the last minute to change its destination, that's when you'll discover how different it is from the wild duck with its stiff, cramped manoeuvres. You'll marvel at how the crow weaves through the narrowest of gaps between branches and slips between leaves with as little effort as a sheet of paper on the breeze, leaving no trace of its passage.

The crow's wings are remarkable. Its wonderful flying ability seems to lie in its long wings, which are out of all proportion with its body. Sometimes, when it is standing on the ground, a crow will spread its wings and afford you a full view. The wings are so black and so elegant that you can appreciate why beautiful young girls in ancient tales are described as having eyebrows black as crows' wings reaching to their temples. It's a very vivid description.

The tenacious Tokyo crows compelled me to change my opinion of these birds. I realised that my

observation of crows over the previous decades had been extremely cursory and that my prejudice betrayed a lack of personal responsibility.

It's true that crows are naughty, mischievous birds. There's a place in Inokashira Park where people leave their bicycles under the trees. Most of the bikes have been abandoned. Crows come and land on the saddles, cock their heads to check the coast is clear, then start pecking at the seats, and keep pecking until they have pulled out all the foam stuffing. When they find there is nothing left inside, they move on to peck at another saddle, never tiring of this pleasure. Some bikes that are parked there temporarily also get pecked at. When the owners return and see what has happened, they swear at them: "Bastards!" And the crows fly off noisily. But it's not long before they are back to attend to unfinished business. People have short memories, it seems, and there are often bikes parked there. What's more, the crows are always flying off with things they've picked up in their beaks. I saw several crows fly up into the trees or onto someone's roof with ring-pull cans that had been dropped on the ground. They'd check them over, as though hoping there might be a drop of alcohol left. Once, a crow found a piece of white silk somewhere and was flying about over Inokashira. The white silk unfurled and everyone down on the ground looked up to watch it. Another time, when I was walking down the road on

my way back from giving a lecture at Tokyo U., I happened to look up and see a completely black crow with a tomato in its beak, as red and shiny as a ruby, flying across the blue sky. On that occasion, the crow did seem to be putting on a performance. It flew around for a long time, as though not wanting to land. It was a truly beautiful scene, the colours all perfect together. Afterwards, when the crow eventually flew off into the woods in the park, for a moment it felt as though part of the landscape between heaven and earth had been destroyed.

When spring arrived, I discovered something else: that crows are an emotional breed. Spring is their mating season, and during this time the crows in Inokashira lost their usual stately composure, and flew about the branches, creating a terrific commotion with their cawing and flapping. It was as though they were seized with an obsession or mania, flying about, chasing through the woods, unable to distinguish night from day, neither eating or drinking. Then, one day, when I was sitting on a bench in Inokashira Park watching them, I noticed that they all looked thinner and weaker than before, as though each bird was little more than a pair of wings. I was shocked by the exhaustion and hopelessness in their eyes. Occasionally, there'd be a skirmish, and the sky would fill with black feathers. One poor crow was so exhausted it fell off its branch. It staggered to its feet in a daze, beat its wings

and flew back to the branch. Seeing such mental and physical exhaustion, I couldn't help but feel sympathy for them.

For almost the entire spring, they lived life to the full, burning up their energy, wearing down their spirit. It was not until summer was approaching, when the trees were lush with green and the ground was covered with fresh shoots, that they began to calm down.

Of course, crows can also be infuriating. In my case, their tireless racket often left me without a moment's peace in which to write. There was an electricity pole not far from my accommodation with a crow that could sustain a constant cawing from morning till night. I felt like taking a bamboo cane outside and shooing all the crows away. But I was afraid that my Japanese neighbours might see me and start saying that the Chinese treat crows badly. I was very tempted, but eventually abandoned the idea. How many times was my train of thought broken? When I couldn't get back on track, and my mind went blank, in the end, I gave up and started listening to the different sounds the crows made. I discovered that they weren't all the same: some went "wa", some went "ah", and the one on the electricity pole went "wu ah, wu ah". When a Japanese friend turned up, I asked,

"Do you understand what the crows are saying?"

"No," she smiled, "do you?"

"No," I smiled back, "they're speaking Japanese!"

And she laughed out loud.

The Inokashira crows caused a significant delay in my writing, and that's a fact.

The Japanese indulgence of crows has only made matters worse. The bird population has increased, and now just the matter of crows pecking through rubbish bags or messily rootling through rubbish bins is quite a headache. The crows come flying out of the forest first thing in the morning looking for food, and instead of flying towards the outskirts of the city, they circle above the centre. When they spot an empty alleyway, down they go. With two or three jabs they can peck open a rubbish bag left out for collection. The result is rubbish strewn all over the place. On Japanese television there are dedicated discussions, which are often very amusing, about how to deal with crows. The Japanese are very ingenious, and come up with all kinds of amazing ideas. Some of these are shown on television: they start off being very effective, but crows are smart, and when they've tackled a new method a few times, and worked it out, they cruelly mock the humans' efforts. It's hilarious to watch.

In Japan, it seems there are two types of crows: city crows and country crows. The city crows peck at rubbish bags, and the country crows steal the farmers' fruit. For a while there was a television programme following some country crows: how they were stealing fruit, the ideas the farmer came up with, and how the

crows got their own back. The crows descended into the vineyard like an army of paratroopers, and started stripping the grapes from the vines. The elderly farmer shooed them away by beating on an enamel basin, but as soon as he left, they were back again. The farmer had no choice but to stand guard in the vineyard. But he had a plan. He was deliberately wearing a brown jacket to create a signal for the crows: if they associated the farmer with the brown jacket, then they would associate the brown jacket with the farmer. He lay down and pretended to be asleep. When the crows came, he leapt to his feet. The idea was that this would signal to the crows that when he was lying down, he wasn't necessarily asleep. The farmer tried it a few times, and saw that it worked. Then came the part of the plan where – like a cicada leaving its shell – he slipped out of his jacket, wrapped it around a scarecrow, lay the scarecrow down in the vineyard and went home. But the crows were too intelligent, and saw straight through this cunning trick. They flew about in the sky for a long time, making a racket, then, testing whether it was safe to descend, discharged a shit into the “farmer's” face. They dived low, then quickly soared upwards, and repeated this several times. They soon realised it was a ruse – the real farmer did not have such patience – and descended in such a maelstrom that the vine frames started swaying. They ate their fill, then perched on the vine frames, and did not

fly off until the sun was going down in the west. The next day, when the old farmer looked at the vineyard with only a few grapes left on the vines, he was almost in tears. After that, he reached for his rifle, though he never opened fire on the crows.

Shortly before we left Japan, I went to Inokashira Park again with my family. The cherry blossom was just out. All we could see were the crows flying about the crowds of people who had come to admire the cherry blossom. It certainly made a lively spring scene.

I returned to Beijing, and when I had settled in, I set about writing again. But for the first few days I couldn't write anything.

"Why can't I write?" I asked my wife.

"Because there's no crow calling from the top of the electricity pole outside," she said.

Reminded of the Inokashira crows with which I seemed to have become so familiar, I went outside and looked up at the sky. The sky over Beijing was empty. There was not a single crow.

It was not until dusk that I finally saw any crows. They were flying high, very high, as though unwilling to come any closer. I knew that these crows had probably flown a long way, and that they had been looking for food in the fields on the outskirts of the city where there were no people, and that they were now on their way back to their homes in the city. Their homes would not be among the ordinary people, but safe

within the enclosed grounds of Zhongnanhai and the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse, where people couldn't hurt them or frighten them.

Then, one day, when I was reading some Yuan dynasty drama, the characters *gong ya* ("palace crows") caught my eye. Was it preposterous, I wondered, to imagine that that's exactly what those crows were?

Translated by Helen Wang



劉慈欣

Liu Cixin

An engineer by trade, Liu Cixin began writing science fiction in the early 1990s and published his first short story in 1999. Over the past decade he has won multiple awards for his fiction and has become China's most popular domestic science fiction author. Liu's recent novels have led to increased mainstream attention to the genre. The second volume of his *Three Body* trilogy, *The Dark Forest*, made a number of year-end best-of lists in 2008, and his work has been critiqued in literary journals such as *Book City* and *Fiction World*. The first volume of the *Three Body* trilogy is published in the US by Tor.

Liu Cixin: Science Fiction Is the Most Global Literature

Interviewed by Ken Liu

Liu Cixin is the leading figure in China's small but vibrant community of science fiction writers. Not only has his fiction been recognized by peers in the form of literary awards (for example, he won China's Galaxy (Yinhe) Award for an unprecedented eight consecutive years from 1999 to 2006, and again in 2010), he is also the best-selling science fiction author in contemporary China, having sold more than 500,000 copies of each novel in his most popular series, Remembrance of Earth's Past (popularly known as the "Three-Body" series).

A computer engineer by profession – until 2014, he worked for the China Power Investment Corporation at a power plant in Niangziguan, Shanxi Province – Liu began writing science fiction as a hobby. However, his popularity took off with the publication of the Three-Body series (the first volume, The Three-Body Problem, was serialized in Science Fiction World magazine in 2006 and then published as a standalone book in 2008). An epic story of alien invasion and humanity's journey to the stars, the series begins with a secret, Mao-era military effort at establishing communications with extraterrestrial intelligence, and ends (literally) with the end of the universe.

Tor Books, an imprint of Macmillan, began publishing the English translation of the Three-Body series in November 2014. Since this was the first time that a major work of hard science fiction by an author from the People's Republic of China was published in the West, the event received coverage from major media outlets like The New

York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post.

In March 2015, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America nominated The Three-Body Problem for a Nebula Award. The Nebula Award, which is voted on by writers, and the Hugo Award, which is handed out at the annual World Science Fiction Convention and voted on by fans, are usually considered the two most prestigious speculative fiction awards in the world. Liu's nomination marks only the second time in history that a translated novel has been nominated for a Nebula (the first was Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities in 1976).

Ken Liu: First, congratulations! What are your reactions to the Nebula nomination?

Liu Cixin: I'm honored and overjoyed. As a science fiction fan, the Nebula Award and the Hugo Award mean a lot to me. If I had to choose between the Nobel Prize in literature and the Nebula/Hugo awards, I would choose the latter without a moment of hesitation – I'm not so arrogant as to think I could win the Nobel Prize, but I offer this hypothetical to illustrate just how important these two science fiction awards are to me.

At the same time, the ultimate goal of my writing has always been delighting readers rather than winning awards. I can understand why some writers would set garnering awards as their goal, but that's not the kind

of writer I am. For me, the most valuable affirmation comes from readers. Thus, the best thing about being nominated for a Nebula is that perhaps more readers will get to read my novel, and the news will build more publicity for the two sequels in English.

Ken Liu: How did the *Three-Body* series come to be published in English? Can you walk us through the process?

Liu Cixin: This was mainly the result of a successful collaboration between Science Fiction World Publishing (SFW), the publisher of *Science Fiction World* magazine, and China Education Publications Import & Export Co., Ltd. (CEPIEC).

SFW was the original Chinese publisher, and they laid the groundwork for the translation and introduction of the novels to readers in other languages. CEPIEC, on the other hand, was responsible for the key piece: translation. At a time when the company's own finances were rather tight, they invested a great deal of resources and effort into the project, successfully overcoming multiple obstacles during the translation and publishing process. In the end, CEPIEC had to choose between Amazon and Tor Books as potential American partners. CEPIEC chose Tor Books, and subsequent events have proven that the choice was the wise and correct one.

More important, CEPIEC found excellent translators for the series. Ken Liu (the translator for the first and third books) and Joel Martinsen (the translator for the second book) both possess deep and comprehensive linguistic knowledge and the relevant cultural understanding, and were thus able to create outstanding translations. After the publication of *The Three-Body Problem*, Ken Liu's translation was widely praised

by readers and critics. A portion of the success of the book in the American market should be attributed to his skill. Collaborating with such translators is one of the most fortunate events of my writing career.

Ken Liu: I understand that *The Three-Body Problem* has sold more than 20,000 copies in English, which is quite an achievement in the American book market for a translated novel. Do you think the fact that the book is science fiction helped with its reception in the US?

Liu Cixin: The reality is just the opposite. The fact that *The Three-Body Problem* is science fiction only added another obstacle to its reception in America. Most American readers aren't interested in translated literature, especially translated science fiction. As the center of science fiction culture and a science fiction superpower, America has a natural disdain for science fiction from other countries, especially developing countries.

Such a reaction isn't too different from the way Chinese readers might react to *wuxia* martial art fantasies written by American writers – yes, I've read such books. The first thought of the Chinese reader faced with such a work is: *do you actually know how to write wuxia?*

It's not entirely unreasonable for American readers to treat Chinese science fiction with some skepticism. For years, most works of Chinese literature that have been translated in the West are past-oriented, trying to attract foreign readers with Chinese history, folk customs, and similar romanticized bits of China's agrarian antiquity. This trend is so prevalent that among the Chinese literati, there's a saying: "Only the most local can be global." Of course there's value to such works,

but it's not possible to see contemporary China reflected in them, nor is it possible to glimpse the China of the future.

When I wrote the *Three-Body* series, I had in mind only Chinese readers. Not once did I think that one day the novels would be published in America. I am especially glad that American readers can finally read a work that expresses how the Chinese imagine the universe and the future.

Ken Liu: You've seen some of the reviews of the English version and interacted with some American fans in a question-and-answer session. What has surprised you the most about the reactions of non-Chinese readers to this book?

Liu Cixin: To be honest, before the American publication of *The Three-Body Problem*, I prepared myself for the possibility of uniformly negative reviews. Science fiction has had more than a century of development in America, and the tastes of the readers as well as the level of published works are very mature. Chinese science fiction, on the other hand, is still relatively immature – though Chinese science fiction started fairly early, the genre's development was interrupted multiple times in its history. After each such interruption, new writers reviving the genre had to start over without the benefit of lessons learned by older writers during the last round.

The books in the *Three-Body* series, in particular, were written entirely to the tastes of Chinese readers and are stylistically quite different from contemporary American science fiction. The series also suffers from some obvious literary flaws, especially in the first book, *The Three-Body Problem*.

The fact that so many American readers and crit-

ics responded to the book positively was completely unexpected. In contrast to the kind of crude sarcasm and abusive language sometimes directed at my work on the Chinese web, even the critical English comments were very logical and justified, offering suggestions that would be helpful for me in the future.

The positive reception proved a belief I've long held: science fiction is the most global of literatures, and it is capable of being understood by the peoples of all nations and states. One day, I hope that American readers will read my book not because it's *Chinese* science fiction, but because it's simply *science fiction*. Of course, I have to work even harder to achieve this goal.

Ken Liu: I understand you've recently changed jobs so that you can focus more time on writing. Tell us about how that happened and how it has affected your creative process.

Liu Cixin: My old power plant was shut down, and I was offered a chance to go to work at a new power plant built to replace it. However, while the new power plant was five times as large as my old plant, it only needed a crew one-fifth the size of the old one. Although I would receive a big raise to reflect the added responsibility, I would not be able to find much time for writing if I continued my day job as an engineer. Completing another novel would be practically impossible.

The most accurate description of my situation right now is "unemployed." I pretty much spend all my days at home, though my personnel file is kept with the Department of Culture in my hometown – that is, the city government is treated as my "work unit" for bureaucratic purposes.

It's really too bad that I lost my job. Work is a win-

dow through which one remains in touch with society, an indispensable need for a novelist. But it couldn't be helped. In China, as a senior engineer in the power industry, it's easy for me to find a job that pays a lot, but very hard to find a job that gives me the time and mental space to write.

Ken Liu: Although science fiction books aren't as popular as books in other genres, science fiction movies dominate the box office in the West. Do you think maybe the best medium for expressing science fiction ideas is no longer the written word, but a visual format? What about video games and virtual reality? Should writers who are interested in science fiction think about how to tell their stories in these new media?

Liu Cixin: I do think that science fiction ideas are best expressed through visual media like film and TV. Realist literature depicts things that we have seen in life. As soon as the author writes down something like "the farm" or "the little town," a corresponding image appears in our minds. But science fiction is different: what it depicts exists only in the author's imagination, not in real life. When it comes to science fiction, the written word is inadequate. Most science fictional imaginings, especially those truly original conceptions, can only be expressed visually.

For several years now I've been actively involved in the creation of science fiction films, some of which were adapted from my stories, and some original. For a writer, this kind of work is very challenging because writing a story requires only one individual, but making a film requires a whole team and the balancing of multiple opinions.

Games and virtual reality are even newer forms of

media. I've always believed that online games can potentially become a new art form as important as novels and films. Right now, online gaming is in the same nascent stage of development as the first films, and master creators are needed to elevate it, to turn it into art and culture.

The appearance of virtual reality, on the other hand, marks a new era for electronic gaming. This is an instance of science fiction turning into reality, and its future market and cultural potential cannot be overstated. When I was younger, I used to be obsessed with computer games, but later I had to give up all gaming because I didn't have the time. Compared to written fiction and film, games belong to a completely different narrative and representational medium, which I'm still unfamiliar with. This is why I haven't done much with them so far.

Ken Liu: You're currently consulting for the film adaptation of the *Three-Body* series and also for films based on your short fiction. What has that process been like?

Liu Cixin: Since all of my movie projects involve confidential commercial information, I can't reveal too many details. However, I can say that although the movie version of the first installment of the *Three-Body* series is about to commence filming, most of the other films based on my fiction are still only in the planning stages. It will be some time before filming starts on those, and some of them may never get to that stage.

Most of the film projects based on my fiction require heavy investment, and as a result, they are complicated. Compared to novels, films face many more restrictions, such as the demands of the market and the censorship regime. Until the day the cameras start

rolling, no one can say whether a project will actually go through.

The main creators in a film are the director, the producer, and the screenplay writer. As the novelist behind the original work, my involvement is limited.

Ken Liu: What do you think is the biggest crisis facing the world which potentially has a technological solution and which is not getting enough attention?

Liu Cixin: I think the biggest threat facing the human race is a gradual descent into spiritual torpor, accompanied by the disappearance of the drive and excitement for opening up new worlds. In recent years, the rapid development of information technology has acted as a fog that obscured the lack of progress in other fields, creating the illusion of speedy progress.

Take space technology as an example: we have not substantively advanced beyond the achievements of the 1960s. Rockets and spaceships still rely on primitive, inefficient chemical propulsion methods. After the fading of the fervor for space exploration created by the Cold War, humanity basically stopped taking any further steps toward the rest of the universe.

After the Moon landings of the last century, NASA engineers believed that a human would set foot on Mars within ten years. But now, most of them believe that we will not even be able to return to the Moon in ten more years. Lying in the comforting cradle of information technology, the human race has turned inward, content with leisure rather than striving for progress. Human civilization is turning into an inward-facing civilization, and I believe this is the greatest crisis facing our species, one that very few seem to recognize.

Ken Liu: What's a good nonfiction book you've read recently that you'd recommend to other readers?

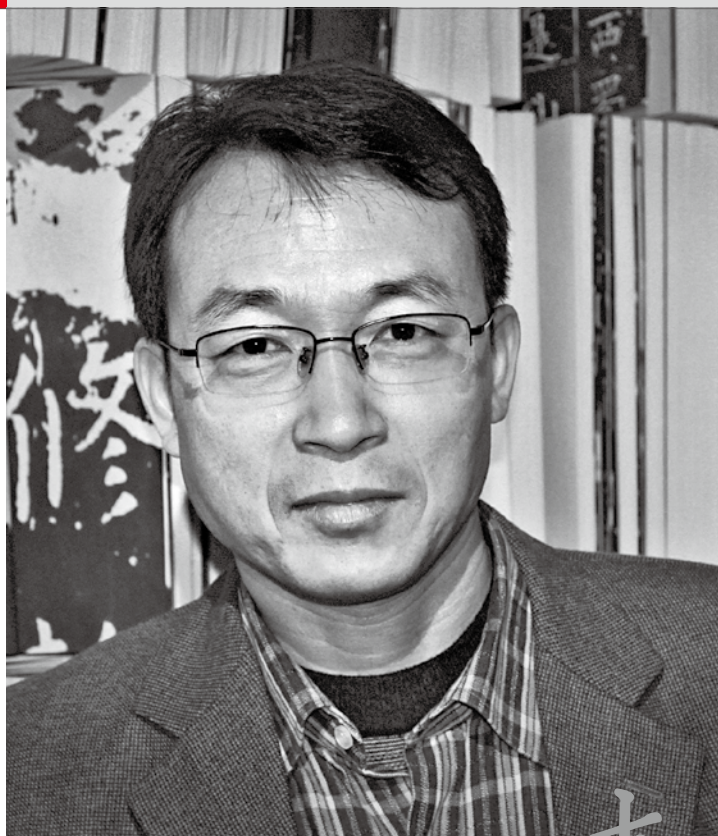
Liu Cixin: I recommend *The Nature of Technology*, by W. Brian Arthur. This book explores the nature of technology from an entirely new perspective, discredits the traditional view of technology as merely the application of science, and offers original views on the fundamental mechanisms for the evolution and development of technology. Though the book's theories are not flawless, they're fresh and provide a unique take on the subject.

Ken Liu: What are you working on now? And what can readers expect from you in the future?

Since I no longer have to go to work, I stay home all day. I've been working on a new novel, but it hasn't been easy. The main difficulty is finding an idea that really excites me. We live in an age where miracles are no longer miracles, and science and the future are losing their sense of mystery. For science fiction (or at least the type of science fiction I write), this development is almost fatal, but I'm still giving it all I've got.

No matter what, my main career in the future will be writing science fiction. I'm a science fiction author who started as a science fiction fan: I came from science fiction, and to science fiction I shall return. I hope to delight readers even more with my future work.

This interview was conducted in Chinese and translated into English by Ken Liu



李洱

Li Er

Despite Li Er's modest claim to be a "not very prolific" author, he has published five story collections, two novels and approximately 50 novellas and short stories. He has acquired a passionate fan base of highly literate and intellectual readers, and also attracted attention from literary critics and academics for his stylistically innovative prose. Li Er's second novel, *Cherry on a Pomegranate Tree* has been translated into German. His stunning debut novel *Huaqiang [Truth and Variations]*, which explores the fate of the individual in contemporary China and the problematic quest for "historical truth," is currently being translated into English and will be published in 2015.

Where Are You?

By Li Er

Where are you, she asks. I've been here all along. She must be completely blind now. I reach out to touch her. I feel her chest and notice her heartbeat is irregular, sometimes stopping altogether. She lets me touch her ears. I find a thick, sticky pus leaking out.

I feel a sudden wave of compassion – I should say something to comfort her.

“Don’t be sad, sister. Dying in the womb might not be a bad thing.”

When she doesn’t react, I begin to think she might be deaf as well as blind – but no, out of the blue she pulls up both legs and stomps down on my knee. She keeps at it until I cry out in pain and choke on a mouthful of fluid. Then she returns her feet to their position near my mouth.

Y and I have been here for a while already, and I don’t know how much longer we can stay. Many people have a fondness for the place where they grew up, but no one ever thinks about this place we’re at now, save for the obstetricians and gynecologists who make their living here. Instead everyone misses wherever they went afterwards, the first place they spent any time. They call it “home,” but they’re wrong. This is their real home.

Of course, there was one person who cared about our home aside from our mother and the doctors, and that was the philosopher. He was at least fifty, but with his dental veneers and dyed hair he looked much younger. He was always shuffling back and forth in front of our door, like a dog turning in circles chewing

its tail.

He often carried a rose in one hand. She was easily overcome by its perfumed scent, and once this happened they would make love on the sofa. I want to return to the womb, he said once, become a fetus again. When I heard this I said to Y, it’s easy for him to talk from out there. Let’s trade places you old windbag! You come in and I’ll go out!

It seems he heard my wisecracks. He had lost face and immediately vented his anger. His method was to prod us with a cudgel, and crush us under his belly. He was a pathetic man, but I was glad it was him and not one of the others. Why? Because he never prodded us for long, and his belly exerted the least force. One or two thrusts and he was done. With some of them it was like being crushed under a millstone. They came rolling over us, grinding and prodding like it would never end. If anyone could be called the cream of this woeful crop, it was the philosopher, and for this reason I liked him a little.

Later, he died. He flipped his car on the freeway while driving to give a lecture. He ended as a pile of ground meat, his lecture notes blowing down the lanes – dozens of pages. The topic was, “How Do We Learn to Live? How Do We Learn to Die?” The one thing we can be sure of is he never expected to die on the freeway. The last page of his lecture read:

Human beings are unique because, unlike other animals, we know we will die. Though an animal may watch a member of its own species die, it does not imagine it will face the same fate. This demonstrates that humans are a special kind of animal that can ex-

trapolate its own experiences from the experiences of others.

Then he touched on his own demise, saying he knew he would die at his podium, in front of his students, “eyes slowly closing under their attentive gazes.” What a windbag. Really.

Things were a little better when the philosopher was alive, mostly because there weren’t so many people coming to crush and prod us. After he died it was nonstop. When we took account of our situation, our increasingly cramped quarters, and the ever murkier fluid that surrounded us – all of our pissing and shitting had to be done in here – it was clear that our current environment was intolerable. If you could actually remember this motherland, you would most likely agree. Then again, if you’re one of those guys who doesn’t know anything other than shuffling back and forth in front of our door, and rubbing your meat-cudgel on our doorframe, then I’m wasting my time. I may as well play piano for an ox. That’s an expression I picked up from the philosopher. He said it all the time, but he was too stuck-up to explain what an ox was.

I just remembered something from a while back, when we still thought this place wasn’t so bad, when we still prided ourselves on being self-sufficient because we were drinking our own piss and shit. It happened the same day the philosopher died. It was afternoon and she had just returned from the scene on the freeway. She smoked a bunch of cigarettes, went to the mirror to brush her hair and do her make-up, and then hauled us off to the hospital. In a corridor that led to the stairs I saw a bunch of kids in similar circumstances to our own. Mostly they were curled up in their mother’s bellies, eyes darting around, anxious and unsettled. Only the smaller ones had no idea where they were. Happy in ignorance, they paddled in their

narrow waterways without a care in the world. One chunky kid was hanging upside down in his womb sniveling, wiping his nose with his toes. A pessimist (that’s another word I learned from the philosopher). When things quieted down I took the opportunity to ask him why he was crying. As long as you’re here you may as well make the best of it, I said. For a moment he just stared at me. Then, as he was about to be taken upstairs, he said, I’m about to die, idiot. Is there any reason I shouldn’t cry? I came to understand a lot of things in that moment. I suddenly knew why there were so many pessimists, so many living without hope. Then, just as he was heading upstairs, he asked, do you have a father? I thought for a moment, but I couldn’t imagine who my father might be. Afraid to disappoint him I lied and said, my father is a philosopher. He stopped crying and smiled as soon as he heard those words. Count yourself lucky, then. None of the rest of them have fathers. Then he went upstairs and I never saw him again. By the time it was our turn to go upstairs it was dark outside, but the room we entered was lit as bright as day. A pair of doctors in diagonally striped uniforms whispered a few words to each other, then directed our mother to enter a complicated piece of machinery. A blinding light shone through the skin of her belly and onto our bodies. It was so intense it hurt my eyes, and we thought we might melt. Y covered her eyes and screamed, and I remember thinking I was about to pass out. I came to a while later and began to lick the burns on my skin. Y kept crying out that she couldn’t see. Just as I was about to say something to comfort her I heard adults speaking nearby.

I have good news for you. You’re three months pregnant.

Take it out.

Not it. Them. There’s two.



Illustration by Wang Yan

Well take *them* out. Get rid of them.

It can be done, of course, but there are risks. These surgeries have been rather frequent in your case, and things are already a bit of a mess down there. Once more and you may not recover.

These monsters are ruining my life.

There is another option. A new kind of medication. Just hit the market. It's a little on the expensive side, but...

I'll take it. I'll take the medicine.

She received a pile of pills from the doctor, pills that were supposed to kill us, so we could be excreted like parasitic worms. She took them on the spot, borrowing the doctor's cup to wash them down. They were blue, like the Viagra the philosopher took. On the way home she bought a bottle of mineral water to wash down another dose.

She took the pills with her coffee. She took them

with red wine. She took them with liquor. Once in a bar she lifted her face from a man's crotch to say, wait a moment, I have to take my medication. That time she washed them down with the man's semen. Those pills were powerful stuff. Most days they made Y and I vomit and suffer diarrhea. Whenever she went to the toilet she brought a pair of chopsticks and a hammer. The chopsticks were for sifting through her feces to see if she could find our remains. The hammer in case she found us there still alive.

Those were difficult times.

Once she brought us to a job fair, and that initiated a brief period of happiness for us. This is how it happened: just as we reached the point where life was no longer bearable, she received an invitation letter. The moment the gold-sealed envelope appeared through the gap under our door, I had a premonition that big changes were coming. For an entire day she could hardly contain her excitement. She even lay naked on her bed caressing us through the skin of her belly. With her belly resting against the mattress, and her back arched, Y and I could rest somewhat comfortably in our constricted environment. This unexpected treatment was a happy surprise. She woke up early the next day and took a run by the polluted river that ran past our front door.

Thousands attended the job fair. The participants were separated into large halls each with a capacity of a hundred or so, though the actual numbers were probably much higher. Very quickly I realized that most of the colorfully made-up and attired women at the fair were pregnant. The only exceptions were the reception staff shuttling through the crowds carrying ceramic trays loaded with glasses of wine. Scratch that. Two of them had kids in their bellies as well, never mind that they were only seventeen or eighteen years old.

One of the pregnant ones was registering the names and addresses of the attendees. She wore a professional smile, while the kid in her belly attempted to stifle his sobs with a hand. I noticed the kid's face bore a resemblance to an older gentleman who was making small talk with new arrivals in the main hall. The woman approached us and asked if it was a boy or a girl. A boy and a girl, she replied. Well, it looks like you've struck gold! Then the greeter turned to another attendee and asked if she also had a boy and a girl. It's too early to tell, the woman said. That's fine. Either way you'll make a killing.

Before long we were shuffled into small, dark rooms at the sides of the hall where we had to endure ultrasounds. Then we were sorted again according to how many months along we were, though to be honest, that's a rather vague concept. In the end there were just three groups: those who had already developed lanugo, the soft downy hair that grows in the womb, those who had not, and those who already had shed their lanugo, indicating they were in the final months. This last group was sent home. Fortunately Y and I belonged to the middle group and were allowed to stay.

Next we had another test of our physical fitness. An emcee appeared and began encouraging us to dance until we no longer had the strength to move. He directed two of the reception staff to bring in a massive sound system bigger than a man. It squatted in the center of the main hall like some kind of monster, while a team of young men and women scurried around it busily pushing buttons and checking displays. The emcee was rail-thin and had a yellowish pallor, as if he was malnourished, or at least thoroughly debauched. In a raspy voice he encouraged us by saying music was the purest of art forms, without

a trace of depravity, an innocent indulgence of the senses. So dance, he cried, dance! Start dancing, damn it! Yes, I mean you. And you, too. Don't try to fool me, you're no virgin! Dance! That's right, you too! Get dancing or get out! Go on! It's only when you dance that the little ones can dance, too. And if the little ones don't dance we can't assess their fitness. So come on and dance! That's it! There you go!

Soon all the kids were dancing with abandon, even Y. Some wrapped their umbilical cords around their waists. Some were rocking back and forth sucking their toes. I have no idea how long we danced before the adults began forming pairs, dancing in each other's arms. The emcee was delighted. He did a back flip right there in the main hall and then made funny faces for the crowd. He was so deeply moved he even cried like an albino ape moaning in its cage. He then approached our mother with a flip and separated her from the man she was dancing with. He said, I want both of your little ones.

Really?

I wouldn't lie to you. I'm more artist than businessman. Without the integrity of my word, I have nothing.

Is it because they're gifted in some way?

It all comes down to education. As they say, it takes ten years to grow a tree, but a hundred to train a man. I'll make time to come see you, tonight or tomorrow, one way or another. I want to give those two little ones an education, raise them to become people of worth. Let's just leave it at that. I'll call soon.

After the job fair she was a different person, so overcome with happiness she could hardly sleep. She leapt out of bed in the morning and, without putting on a single strip of clothing, stood flirtatiously in front of the mirror. She lightly caressed her neck, breasts

and belly, and shot enchanting looks at her reflection. In all the time since I had been conscious I had never seen her so elated. Normally she was resentful, bemoaning her fate. In fact, I don't ever recall her being happy. Even when the philosopher made love to her she had folded her hands behind her head, chewed her gum, and stared up at a spider on the ceiling. Why was she so happy now? I felt it had to be because Y and I performed so well at the job fair. We had honored her as a mother. We were no longer a humiliation.

Late one night the man from the circus came to visit. She opened the door for him with obvious surprise. He held a strip of paper on which our address was written, but oddly he kept addressing her by another woman's name. She mildly corrected him, but he persisted in his error. After hearing his recommendation, the director of the circus had immediately sent him to get her signature on a contract, he said. We've been fretting so much over how to fill these slots, we've practically ground our teeth down to nothing.

I won't sell just one. If you want them, you have to buy them both. Otherwise one will be left alone. I can't bear to separate brother and sister for life.

But I've only got one slot, and you've got twins in there, right?

Yes. You said you wanted them both.

Did I say that?

Yes. And you said you were an artist, that your word was good.

It's true, I am an artist, but...

Please, take them both. I'll settle for a lower price.

All right, then. I suppose I could bump someone else off the list and give you their slot.

The man pulled a slide projector out of a case. It was the first time Y and I had ever seen one, so naturally we were curious. He projected images of circus

life for us to see. I had never seen lions, tigers, and elephants before. Though they weren't living in the jungles or on the savannah, they still looked powerful and strong. The images of them playing and roughhousing with their keepers were especially appealing. On some level they must have sparked my own fantasies. How wonderful it would be to spend every day in a place like that! I immediately fell in love with the circus. Excitedly I began to imagine a future in which I rode across the world on the back of a tiger, with Y dancing and leading the way. I explained each slide to Y as they appeared. As we watched the images, the two of them held each other – I knew what they would do next. I saw slides of dwarves, three-legged circus freaks, and animals born without eyes and noses. By that time the man was pressing us under his belly so hard we could hardly breathe. He said to her, you've signed the contract, so you must do exactly what it says. Make sure you take your medicine every day. Draw your belt tightly around your belly. We don't want them growing into big oafs – I'm not hurting you, am I?

Then I remembered how much Y and I had enjoyed freely dancing, and I realized what a farce this all was. But Y didn't notice anything wrong. Later she would enjoy thinking about the animals, and imagining she was a dancer turning pirouettes and somersaults. Even when it became clear that the woman who signed that contract was turning us into freaks, Y felt it was a gift. My voice hoarse, I shouted that we were being taken advantage of. Y replied in a deliberately matter-of-fact tone: Who knows, maybe we're taking advantage of them? As long as we're still alive what do we have to complain about? I felt a sudden wave of pity, but this pity was in fact an extraneous thing, like a polyp growing in your bowels or sinuses.

I told Y that when the time came, I should be the first one out. I did this because somehow I knew that the first one out was likely to die. Even if it was just a slight chance, I still wanted to be first. I crammed Y off to one side and strained to brace myself in position as close to the cervix as possible. Every inch was a battle. If that woman so much as twitched I slipped back to my previous position and had to start all over. A few times I groped my way right to the threshold, but there was nothing I could grab to hold myself in place. I had no choice but to abandon my plan.

Then I thought of a hunger strike. For a while now all it seemed that all we were eating were the drugs. Whenever the man from the circus came to visit, aside from groping her up and down he always made sure to check if she was taking her medicine. The pills, which gave off a bluish light, were meant to disfigure us as quickly as possible: grow an extra leg, or an arm, or another pecker. An extra pecker wouldn't make any difference to me – I already had one – but if Y were to grow one I wouldn't know what to do. Would she still be my sister?

When I announced my hunger strike, Y was beside herself with excitement – it meant more food for her. My gluttonous junk-food loving sister thought about little else besides her next meal. It was like an addiction. By the third day of the hunger strike I was barely conscious. A doctor was visiting regularly to take the woman's pulse, measure her temperature, and give her injections. All of their conversations revolved around me. It seemed he had never seen a case like this. My ploy was completely unexpected. Though barely conscious, I could still sense their frustration, and that made me happy. Death was approaching. I passed out. In the moment before I lost consciousness I felt a deep satisfaction.

But things have gone wrong. I wake up again. I quickly realize that I haven't died. All of these days of effort were wasted. I want to ask Y, why did I wake up again? How did they force me to eat? But the words don't come. I am too shocked by the change in Y: she's completely blind and deaf. There is an occasional heartbeat, but mostly her heart is silent. Her senses had been in decline for a while but I had no idea they would give out so quickly. The truth is I envy her. I can only guess that while I was unconscious she was eating my portion of food as well, chunking up considerably, and getting a double dose of the drugs.

Y dies two days later. We miscalculated. She wanted to live, and I wanted to die. Now I would be the one to leave this place alive, and she's gone, all because of my hunger strike. If I had instead wrested her food from her and eaten it, I would have died in her place. After Y's death they add a new drug to our regimen based on an analysis of our excrement. I don't know what the drug looks like, nor what it is called. From their conversations I gather it is a Chinese herbal treatment used for generations by a family of traditional doctors. Once it enters the fluid around me, my appetite increases dramatically. It forces open my lips. It makes my tongue wish to taste food again. This drug is like a fantastic elixir from the heavens, a magic potion. Once it is in your system, the effects are powerful. All of your efforts to resist come to nothing.

I keep watch over Y's body. She will never again vent her frustrations at me. There is no one to kick my knees. I begin to lose hope. Is Y feeling the same? Probably not, I guess. She has someone to watch over her body. According to that line of reasoning, I shouldn't be discouraged either, as I don't care if anyone watches over me in the end. Once I'm gone it's none of my business what anyone else does. I no lon-

ger feel hopelessness, or anything else for that matter, and when I realize this, I become terrified.

In the morning the doctor gives her two shots to induce labor. With each shot I feel more and more like the legendary monkey king Sun Wukong trapped in the burning oven – I have to get out of this place. She is sitting in the rocking chair with her legs spread wide, pushing me out. If I lose hold for one second I'll pop out. I shove Y out first, then move myself into a horizontal position, bracing myself across the threshold. I won't be able to hold out against the labor-inducing drugs for long, but I want to put up a good fight, make them wait, give them a taste of my strength.

After all, what else can I do?

Translated by Joshua Dyer



麥家

Mai Jia

Mai Jia was born into a family with a “bad background”: his father was a rightist and his maternal grandfather a landlord. He joined the army to improve his political status, but after a stint writing propaganda, his talents were recognized and he became an author. In 2002, he published his first novel *Decoded*, which took him eleven years to write, but made him famous overnight. He’s now referred to as the “father of Chinese thrillers.” His five novels since *Decoded* have all been overnight bestsellers, and his novel *The Message* was cast as a major motion picture in 2009. *Decoded* was published in English in 2014.

Mai Jia: Chinese Espionage Confronts the World

Interviewed by Shu Jinyu

After I saw Mai Jia for the first time in 2002, I wrote this description in my diary: “Buzzed hair; glasses. A young writer of few words. He’s not self-aggrandizing, but his unmatched confidence leaves a very strong impression.”

*Mai Jia is no more self-aggrandizing when I interview him twelve years later – but in the meantime he’s been pushed into the tumult of the literary world. On March 18th 2014 the English translation of Mai Jia’s novel *Decoded* was published in England, America, and other countries. Before *Decoded* came out, Penguin’s former CEO John Makinson and North Asia Managing Director Jo Lusby went to Hangzhou and gave Mai Jia a special edition of *Decoded* and a commemorative print.*

*Mai Jia’s writing process seems to run in six year cycles. After beginning to write in 1986, it took him six years to find his place. In 1992 he began to write *Decoded*, which didn’t come out until 2002. As a television series of the same name grew in popularity, Mai Jia became somewhat nonplussed by his celebrity. Six years later in 2008, *In the Dark* won the seventh Mao Dun prize for literature. Because the novel belonged to the genre of espionage fiction, Mai was criticized for lacking “literary qualities.” After another six years went by, *Decoded* and *In the Dark* went out into the world.*

What has Mai Jia experienced in these many years of creation? Is turning from a relative unknown into a house-

hold name the life Mai Jia wanted?

Shu Jinyu: People really began to know you with *Decoded*, *In the Dark*, and *The Message*. But before this you had written many more “literary” works – yet the more you wrote, the more exhausted you felt. Was this because you had no readers?

Mai Jia: I grew up in the countryside. When I started to write in 1986, I wrote literary works about topics like the countryside and the land, but no-one read any of them. It’s said “being poor changes your thinking” – authors always hope to have more readers. Later I began to sift through things again, and I discovered I actually had a pretty unique life, so I turned to what people call espionage novels and started to write *Decoded*.

Shu: But *Decoded* took ten years to get published. What did you experience during that time?

Mai: I started *Decoded* right before I graduated from the Army Art Academy. This topic was very hard to write. First, no one had written about it before. Second, there are a lot of special considerations: how to keep military secrets, how to tread the Party line without crossing it. It’s torturous. When the book finally came out in 2002, I had gotten seventeen rejec-

tions in the previous eleven years. One reason was that my technique was underdeveloped; a second was that the topic was sensitive; a third was that I myself spent a lot of time fumbling around. I could draw on others' experience when I was writing about different topics, but writing espionage fiction I had to rely entirely on myself. *Decoded* was my whetting stone. My will, technique, and ability were all rigorously tested. All this to say: *Decoded* isn't just my first work, it's also my most treasured.

Experiencing the first two rejections was a significant shock. I almost broke down: I took my bag and got on a train. I had no idea where I was going to go. My attitude was one of complete self-exile. Walking and walking, I suddenly realized: I had to find a topic I liked. After that, even when I was making changes midway, adding content, getting rejected – I was relatively calm. *Decoded* painted the foundational shade of my life. Going through so many twists made me realize a lot of life's realities, like the need to be pragmatic. After my so-called fame, my relationship with writing has been pretty healthy; it hasn't created too much pressure.

Shu: When you were stuck, were there any people or works that influenced you and helped you realize what you needed to do?

Mai: My shift from rural topics to espionage was partly inspired by books. Most people think espionage novels are a form of common literature that pure literature doesn't touch. One day I was reading Borges

and Poe's novels and I got some encouragement. They both wrote detective stories – their characters include horse thieves and intelligence officers, and the books talk about how to solve crimes and catch thieves – but who in the literary world dares to look down on them? So what you write isn't important; what matters is how you write. I resolved to try writing espionage novels.

Shu: So who discovered *Decoded*? And how was it published?

Mai: I gave it to *Dangdai*'s editors Hong Qingbo and Zhou Changyi. They liked it and it came out through *Dangdai* first. The draft of the book was passed off to Li Shidong at China Youth Press. According to him, the day he got the draft, the weather was fantastic. As he passed a riverbank on his way home he decided he'd read a few pages first. He didn't expect he'd end up reading the whole thing in one sitting. That night, Li Shidong called me and said it was written very well, so I didn't make any more changes. And thanks go to them, otherwise, I would have been destroyed. Writing does take some encouragement. I got more attention through *Decoded*, my confidence increased, and my writing process became more relaxed.

Shu: *In the Dark* won the seventh Mao Dun Literary Prize. It was criticized by quite a few people who thought you couldn't tell stories. However, I notice that the language of your work is quite ambitious.

Mai: I have a very general theory: the people who

say my works do not have literary qualities may not have read my novels. I don't say that because I'm confident. The media pushes me as "The Father of Spy Novels." This kind of high praise will cause people to have a very strong reaction and say my work is just popular fiction. I believe that if they were to read my novels, they would change their minds. I can't say my novels are the best, but they are at least literature. Even after being made into a television series, they still retain literary qualities.

Shu: So how do you preserve the literary quality of popular fiction?

Mai: It's shown first in the language, and then in the characters. My characters aren't flat: they have deep inner lives, nuanced feelings, and complex fates. A lot of espionage novels lose this and push straight into the story. It gets over-simplified, so it also gets commercialized. Whether you're talking about *Decoded* or *In the Dark*, my novels do a lot of work and experimentation in this respect. My labor was also one of individualization. *In the Dark* might not be a classic, but it has more literary qualities than any of the other spy dramas produced over the years.

Shu: You've said before that you don't want to categorize your work, that you'd prefer to just call them "works of literature."

Mai: Li Shidong called it "new intelligence" fiction when he was promoting it. Afterwards he changed it to "espionage" or "spy" fiction. From the perspec-

tive of the work's quality, the logic is very tight, so you could say it has intelligence.

I think these terms are secondary. "Espionage" is the look of the work; "intelligence" is its mode. The characters are what's important. I created characters that were unprecedented in Chinese literature and it was because of this that the literary world paid attention.

Shu: Some critics call you "The Father of Modern Chinese Spy and Espionage Literature."

Mai: If it were possible I would deny it, but if that denial was unsuccessful, I wouldn't really care. These labels are like brand names; they're only meant to elevate you. The world-renowned magazine *The Economist* just wrote a report about me. It said *Decoded* was "a great Chinese novel," that it was the best Chinese novel in 35 years and everyone should read it: "Mr Mai has been labeled the 'Dan Brown of China' because both have sold millions of books, but there the comparison ends. This novel has the expansive sweep of Gabriel García Márquez's magical realism; like Peter Carey he plunges fully into a new world... Yet Mr Mai's authority is his own. He plays with the reader: his story, he begs, 'hungers to be trusted'... He offers a beguiling and magical mystery tour of China. It is an absolute joy to read." Maybe he really liked the book, but it's also possible he doesn't understand Chinese literature. I've just run into an admirer, that's all. His words might influence a few people, but they won't influence me. The novel won't be any better for

his review and it won't be any worse for a bad review. There's one issue a writer must face during the process, which is that after your work is published, some people will hold you in high esteem and others will misread or belittle you. You shouldn't feel proud or ashamed because of this. When it comes down to it, the work is the writer's before it's finished; after the work is finished it isn't the writer's anymore.

In 2008, In the Dark won the Mao Dun Prize. The text of the award said: Within the sphere of contemporary Chinese literature, Mai Jia's works are undoubtedly unique. His novels have an unusual degree of imagination, while his plots have a distinct degree of ingenuity and unpredictability. His prose is powerful and concise. As though it is shot through with pain, it can lead you to unknown depths or to a world of unimaginable breadth. His writing provides a unique sense of mystery, happiness, and unexpected pleasure.

Shu: What was it like to write after winning the Mao Dun Prize? When *Knifepoint* came out in 2011, I heard you had stopped writing?

Mai: I stopped writing spy dramas. I had written espionage novels for many years. My stores of emotion and material were almost used up. If I had kept writing I would have repeated myself. There are enough spy dramas on television – this genre has been done to the point of exhaustion. I wanted to challenge myself before I got too old.

Shu: Did you set a goal for yourself?

Mai: My goals and plans were basically nonexistent. After I'd written tens of thousands of characters for *The Message*, I threw it all out in one night. Later, writing *Whispers on the Wind* was like this too. When I was finished writing, I sent it to the publisher and asked them to take a look, but said that I wanted to make some revisions because there were structural problems. They said it was written well and to keep it as it was. It was all niceties.

Shu: Starting afresh after writing so much takes courage.

Mai: It's also a form of self respect. I can't guarantee I'll be satisfied with each work forever, but I can at least guarantee I'm satisfied when I write it. If you trust to luck when you write, you will certainly hurt the readers and yourself.

Shu: You've been writing for almost 30 years; would you be willing to sum up your experience?

Mai: Along the way I've won awards, been published in English, and had my work adapted for TV. I was brought into the literary world, my name grew, and I've been followed by many people. Some things are not beneficial to you and can overwhelm you.

There was a lot of debate around *In the Dark* winning the Mao Dun Prize. But the reasons it actually won certainly had a lot to do with the immense popularity of the TV drama of the same name: the novel sold over 600,000 copies. After it was named as one of the twenty works on the Mao Dun shortlist, one me-

dia outlet went to do street interviews. They talked to twenty people; seven of them mentioned *In the Dark*, but they couldn't name any of the others. I think this kind of occurrence had a certain influence on the selection. Actually, it's not a good thing for an author to get too much attention, and these last few years I've had some works that have failed. For example, after the exorbitant royalties for *Whispers on the Wind* were announced, that had a certain impact on my writing; I got distracted. I feel I rushed into things a bit and now it's hard to extract myself. This is all self-created: I was influenced by fame and wealth; I was tempted; I was pushed forward along with the crowd. Before, I revised *Decoded* a dozen times; now changes have become unnecessary.

I want to change the structure, so I'm starting with the first part of *Whispers on the Wind*. Once I come up with a good plan, I will definitely work according to that plan. Sometimes you're tempted down the wrong road; if I'm not happy on that road, I will start over again. This is one of my valuable traits; I refuse to be pushed. Before, as I wrote, I had to think about how to make a living and I wanted to become famous. Those needs don't exist anymore. I think the less of a name I have the better; the more attention I get, the wearier I get.

Shu: Your characters are all idealists, brave enough to shoulder their responsibilities and fate. When I interviewed you before, you said: "Literature should warm and correct people's hearts." You yourself must

be an author brave enough to shoulder burdens and responsibility.

Mai: Of course. My works will be presented to the public and possibly adolescents. You have to have a sense of responsibility while you're writing. Transmitting what is false, wicked, or unsightly is an injury to others and a kind of disrespect to yourself. This isn't puritanical; this is what it means to be an author. If the human condition is grey and heavy, then you should transform it into a heartening work of art and point people to a higher ideal. "Life is transient; hardship is constant" – everyone can experience the truth of this for themselves, but when you're engaging with the reader, you have to somehow give people the ability to move forward, the power to believe in truth, goodness, and beauty.

Once my son and I were talking, and he said he was thinking about a story in which, in the end, the bad people would kill all the good people and get away. I said there hasn't been a story like that from ancient times to today. Good always defeats evil. There's no lack of evil in life, but when you're writing, you want to correct this. There's nothing to debate about that.

Shu: Is your son interested in literature?

Mai: He's in high school now and has written a book of science fiction. He's under a lot of pressure, so his enthusiasm for literature isn't what it used to be. He also looks at my life – staying home either reading or writing – and he thinks being an author is too

reclusive. My life is inwardly focused; his is outwardly focused. To me, reading and writing are deeply enjoyable things. If you go out to meet up with people and you get along with them, it's a mutually pleasurable experience; if you don't, then it's very unpleasant. Words won't harm you and they won't irritate you. Now that I have something of a reputation, the degree of scrutiny is high; the more it interferes with your life, the more it saps away your time and energy. I don't enjoy this kind of circuit; I'm not willing to give lectures and interact with the people in literary circles. I get quite nervous when I interact with strangers.

In March of 2014, Mai Jia became FSG's first Chinese author. FSG's Chief Editor Eric Chinsky wrote in the letter buying the rights to Decoded: "I love Decoded. It takes something very special in a novel to grab my attention, to make me feel like this is a book I have to publish... Mai Jia has created a very compelling central character and evokes a mysterious landscape of mathematics and espionage, playing the conventions of suspense in a smart and entertaining way."

Shu: *Decoded's* English translation has come out in 21 English-speaking countries, including England and America, but the translation itself has quite the story.

Mai: I didn't imagine it would be this popular abroad. Its degree of popularity exceeded my expectations. It's number 1,030 on Amazon England's rankings and it's been climbing in America too, up to 6,000 or more. English and American media praised me

very highly. I understand: part of it is that they enjoy novels; another is that they don't understand Chinese literature and didn't expect China to have this kind of literary work. FSG's chief editor loved my book so much he couldn't part with it, but he suspected that "Mai Jia" the author might not actually be Chinese.

Decoded has been in print for twelve years now. Some authors who began publishing at the same time became famous quite early. I've been letting things take their course; being a little more passive lets you see what fate has in store for you. I felt that I would get whatever was rightfully mine in the end, and there was no point in struggling for whatever wasn't. I felt I needed to face things outside of literature calmly.

Shu: I heard that during the translation process, Olivia Milburn didn't interact much with you. Some authors think the amount of dialogue they've had with the translator can have an influence on the diligence or accuracy of the translation. What do you think?

Mai: Last November I got Olivia's email from the agent, because at the time she was translating *In the Dark* and there were two errors that foreign readers wouldn't be able to catch. However, she was very standoffish and never gave me her phone number. She's very academic. She's not a translator originally – she researches pre-Qin culture. She was born in England and moved to the Middle East when she was two. Her father is a professor of Arabic and Turkish; her mother is a professor of Persian. She has a gift for languages. By the time she moved back to England

for university she could already speak six. Olivia went to Oxford, and when she was choosing her major she asked her father what the world's hardest language was; he said it was Chinese. She studied it for eight years and ended up getting a PhD in Classical Chinese. Even I can't read the Chinese she researches. Before reading my novel, the most contemporary works she had read were the novels of Feng Menglong from the late Ming dynasty.

If she wasn't familiar with contemporary Chinese literature, then how did she notice me? After she got her PhD she went to Seoul National University to teach Chinese. She went to Shanghai during the World Expo. Her flight home was a little delayed, so she bought two books at the airport bookstore: *Decoded* and *In the Dark*. The only reason she chose my books was because the band on the outside said it was about a cryptographer and her grandfather had been a cryptographer.

What was more absurd was that she didn't know a translator should get in touch with the author. She wanted to translate it so her grandfather could read it. She finished the two books on the plane, but she kept thinking about it. She decided to translate it after reading it for the third time. When I think back, it's quite extraordinary: What if I hadn't encountered this person? What if the plane hadn't been delayed? What if she didn't have a grandfather? It's terrifying to look back. But this has been a common problem for Chinese literature when it tries to move out onto the world stage: there are just too many random factors.

Because people don't understand Chinese culture, they can't do things in a regular fashion. If they encounter it, they encounter it. So much is dependent on luck.

As of today, everyone who has read these two books has said they were translated very well. I trust I've run into a good translator. The translator is a second parent to a work. A good translator can turn average work into great work, and a bad translator can turn great work into trash.

Shu: It's been said that translations of Chinese works don't get very high royalties overseas. What about these two books?

Mai: There's an advance when you sell the rights, and that was pretty high, far more than I expected. The two publishing houses publishing these books are both big names in the industry. Their selection criteria are very strict, but when they pick something, they do a huge printing and get very high returns.

Translated by Hallie Treadway



趙麗宏

Zhao Lihong

Zhao Lihong is a renowned poet and essayist, and is currently head editor of *Shanghai Literature Magazine*, and editor-in-chief of *Shanghai Poets*. His impressive body of work spans some 70 collections of poetry, essay, and reportage, including *The Coral*, *Life Grass*, and *Pictures of the Heart*. His works have won many literary awards and his poetry has been translated into English, French, Russian, Japanese, Korean, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, and Serbian, and published extensively overseas.

The Dead Visitor in Dreamland

I

Father, who passed over twenty years ago
suddenly appears in my dreams.
Without notice, no knock on the door
he stands quietly before me,
the same smile from those years still brimming.
Only his eyes are weighted.
Awestruck, I cry out,
but my mouth produces no sound.
I hold out my arms to Father
and he retreats, smilingly.

In my recollections,
Father never expressed fury.
Even his despair and sadness
had the texture of a faint cloud.
Who says dreams quarrel with reality?
Father, who visits my dream
regards me with the same smile.
If only this frame can freeze—
a long honk from a car outside the window
jolts me, heartlessly.

2

I have never been frightened
of the dead who visit in dreams.
They often come without invitation,
deluding me for a moment, unsure
of the borderline between life and death.
It is very difficult to converse with them
and near impossible to make their acquaintance.
They are a silent black and white film
rolling in the serendipitous dark.

Days spent in bitter remembrance of the departed
don't bring them back in dream.
I pray wordlessly before I sleep.
Come, come visit my dreams.
I want to see you.
The dream door creaks open,
but I am not the one who enters.
Out come faces I have never met:
some are characters from books,
others, strangers I know by name,
then, long-sleeved ancients
and then, suited and tuxedoed foreigners.

3

One night, a long dream:
the first half of it was foggy, as if immersed in a murky mist,
the latter half was clear, as if lit by moonbeam.
A boy dressed only in underwear
opens wide his shining black eyes
and walks towards me,
his skeletal frame phosphorescent.
Atop his head, a spinning halo of flying insects.
They trail like a buzzing kite.
He walks past and looks sidelong at me.
From his black eyes
two crystal teardrops. Unmistakably,
his shivering lips ask,
You, do you still recognize me.

I recognize you, I recognize you.
Memories become available mid-dream.
That is the dream within the dream,
the truth that flies over space-time
and returns to that summer day of childhood,
where quietly he lies in the marsh by the bank.
The river had just swallowed his young life.
The afternoon sun shines upon his naked body.
He and I were similar in age,
yet he was the one who introduced me to death.
The god of death casually bagged him in the water,
turning up a corpse no one claimed. Something
anyone can survey under the sun and speculate.
A fly lands upon his eyelashes.
He does not blink.

Overlap

Worlds forever overlapping
Over and under
Over and under

Look outside
Windows beyond the window
Doors beyond the door
Mountains beyond the mountain
Skies beyond the sky

Look inside
Pupil within the pupil
Mouth within the mouth
Heart within the heart
Soul within the soul

How to exit this overlapping
Break off the lock of layers
First, walk into the interior
Then, walk out again

Open wide the pupil within this pupil
Initiate the heart within this heart
Let fly the soul within this soul
Push out the windows beyond this window
Open the door beyond this door
Ascend the mountain beyond this mountain
Regard the sky beyond this sky

That world without overlap
Where all roads lie, open
Just may be a free one

*The Relationship Between My Flesh and the World
(excerpts)*

5. Hair

My hair
used to be jade wisps, so soft,
a moving cascade in the sunlight. A refraction
of the rainbow at sky's edge.
The grasses swaying in the wind
raving and saluting the earth.

Black, stored up.
Life and all its colors.
Black, bids daylight goodbye
and is then forced to chase down dawn.
Black hair grows, the process
renders all long growths
as short.

When did it happen:
black becoming white?
White as smoke ash, white as surviving snow,
white and rough and vacuous
as a sigh that cuts through a glacier.

Those silken threads
are still atop my head
thinning by the day.
When the wind blows, it still levitates.
The wind says, your earth still lives,
my breath cannot break you.

6. *Spine*

Straighten, straighten, straighten!
My determinedly curving spine.

Back then, you carried heavy loads and traveled far.
The yoke tore through the skin and cut the flesh of
your shoulders.
Your suppressed moan shot into the sky.
But the trembling curvature was the earth below my feet:
my spine stayed true.

In all my voyages, I left no memory of prostration.
And though my head was hung low from the burden,
when I stood and when I walked,
my spine stayed true.
True as that silent central pillar in the living room,
true as my old Father's mahogany cane.

Why then, am I bent now,
my straight spine stooping low.
Is it that the earth's gravity has overcome
or is it decay reaching up from the earth towards me,
yanking me, clutching me,
pulling me into the grave.

Straighten, straighten, straighten.
Am I not presently upright?
If I am weary in earnest,
I will lie down upon my back, face up
allowing the robust land to
support my dog-tired body
smoothing my curved spine.
In that moment, as I watch the sky,
I see a bird above my head
flapping its wings.

Straighten, straighten, straighten up,
my spine, yet to break.

7. Fingerprint

What I leave upon the world
other than my footprints towards all four
directions,
are those transparent fingerprints
on everything that I had touched.
I leave them as a secret trail.

Mother's breast.
Father's shoulder.
Lover's cheek.
Son's small hand.
Cotton jacket, sackcloth, silk,
the overcoat flapping in the cold wind,
and the brim of the rain drenched hat.

Chopsticks, goblet, tea pot
ink and brushes, book pages, abacus
holes of flutes, flag staff, piano keys,
a winding handrail down a flight of stairs
The handle of a forgotten umbrella, a crutch,
all manners of keys
innumerable door handles...

Rice cake, jammed fruit, gourd vegetables:
I taste them all,
chewing them down until my fingerprints are
broken apart.
I save them,
destroy them.
My fingerprints go down my esophagus
innumerable times,
into my ready intestines,
finally becoming one with myself.

My fingerprints
have also once been left on the crystalline dew,
those buds in first bloom,
those shy petals and threads of grass,
the butterfly that was caught and then released,
carrying the seal of my fingerprints upon its
brilliant wings,
flying the whole sky over.

Translated by Karmia Olutade



迟子建

Chi Zijian

Chi Zijian was born in 1964 in Mohe in Heilongjiang province on the Sino-Russian border. Much of her work is situated in northeast China, featuring cities such as Harbin and indigenous peoples like the reindeer-herding Evenki of the Greater Khingan Mountains. Her extensive list of work includes the novels *Peak Among the Mountains*, *Puppet Manchukuo*, *Sunshine Behind the Clouds*, *Last Quarter of the Moon*, *Snow and Raven*, and the short story collections *Tales from an Arctic Village*, *The Snowy Graveyard*, *Travels to White Nights*, *Dead Streams*, *Washing Off the Dust of the Road*, *Mist, Moon and Cow Byre*, and *All the Nights in the World*. She won the 1st, 2nd, and 4th Lu Xun Prizes, the 7th Mao Dun Prize for Literature, and the Australian Suspense Award. Her work has been translated into English, French, Dutch, Italian, and Spanish.

A Horse and Two People

By Chi Zijian

A horse bore two people towards Second River. The horse was a thin horse, somewhat senile, and walked slowly. Yet the two people it bore didn't hurry it either. They stopped using the whip on it many years ago, because the horse had proven itself faithful and cooperative, never slacking on purpose. Both the people and the horse were old now. The horse could not suffer too many strokes, and the people could not muster the courage to strike it.

The old horse bore the two seniors. They were a couple. The man was as thin as the horse. The woman was as round as a thick tree trunk. They did not have the horse's handsome big eyes. They both had small eyes, eyes so small they shouldn't even bother opening them: they always looked half-asleep. Such small eyes on a skinny face appeared to be mounted on bezel settings, just so the stones would appear bigger than they really were. Such small eyes on a rotund face appeared to be two stones that had fallen into a basin of tofu: you could only deduce their whereabouts by following the web of cracks fanning out from their hideaway. Sometimes the horse thought the old woman had no eyes at all.

Second River was about twenty *li* from where they lived. No one resided there. The only local offerings were a serpentine river, open fields and farmland. Of course, there was a mountain, though it was on the opposite riverbank, shadowy and difficult to trek to. The horse once thought the mountain was a very, very big house. It could never fathom what kind of animals lived in it. Perhaps black bears? Maybe wolves, or

even some rabbits? The horse had seen these types of creatures before. The horse thought they had a better fate than him, never needing to heed the hollers of the masters or be bridled harshly to pull the cart. Those animals didn't need to work until their eyes grew cataracts and they lost their appetites. Other times, the horse thought that the inhabitants of the mountain might not even be animals. Perhaps it was where the clouds were. To the horse, clouds were alive and ought to have a home somewhere. Mountains are the closest to the heavens, and would make the most convenient home for them.

As usual, the man sitting in the cart was asleep, arms folded and head hung. The woman slept lying towards the tail of the cart. They weren't worried the horse would take a wrong turn, since there was only one road to Second River. They also didn't worry that the horse would be frightened, since there were no other travelers around this season. Nothing could frighten the horse other than a squirrel crossing the road. And the horse knew that the passengers were sleeping soundly, and so when it met a flat expanse of road, it too would sneak a nap. These days, it felt perpetually tired. It must really be getting on in years.

The horse trotted squarely ahead, and so the old couple continued to ride out their delicious dream in the dewy dawn. An occasional birdsong soared over the moor to wake them for a moment.

In addition to the two people, the horse carried grain and farm tools. They had a cabin at Second River. In the summertime, they had to come every other week and stay for a handful of days each time. The

people slept in the cabin and the horse slept in the fields. Come autumn, no matter how bad the weather, they had to come guard the field or risk losing the grain to the vicious birds. A scarecrow was not formidable enough. They had to roll up their sleeves and get on the battlegrounds themselves.

A breeze rushed through the moor. The wild flowers surrendered their fragrance to the wind. The further away they were from people, the more provocative the bloom. The man on the cart did not like flowers, but the horse did and licked them often. The woman in the back of the cart also loved flowers, but she only loved the bigheaded ones, like lilies or peonies. The small and scattered blooms she despised, saying, “Do these needle pricks deserve to be called flowers too?”

The horse no longer remembered how many times it had walked these twenty *li* to Second River, or for how many years now. It did remember the time it was pulling the newly harvested wheat back to the village and the cart sank into the mud. The horse’s back took countless lashes from the master’s whip and though pain does not increase one’s strength, the delirium from the agony drove the horse mad and the madness resembled motivation. The horse also remembered the first time the old man’s son was handcuffed and taken away. After that, even when the horse walked obediently down a smooth road, it would still suffer a dozen lashes along the journey for no reason. But after the master’s son was handcuffed and taken away a second time, they were much gentler towards it. At night, they even occasionally fed the horse some bean-paste pastries. The woman took to brushing its mane

thoroughly, as if the horse was their son.

Daylight dawned fully. The horse neighed, signaling that they had arrived at Second River. The man jumped off the cart and petted the sweaty animal, saying, most sweetly, “Just take a look at all this sweat on you. I really don’t have the heart to make you labour for much longer.” He turned to gaze upon his old companion, and he was startled to discover the old woman was gone. He presumed she was relieving herself and so he searched the surrounding fields. He found nothing. Usually, when the horse stopped and the old man jumped off the cart, she would still be slumbering so deep in the back that he had to holler, “Hey, wake up old bag, keep sleeping and the sun will roll back behind the mountain!”

The old woman would then sluggishly sit up and mutter to the old man, retelling all her dreams along the road. She had many strange ones. Things like a leaf sprouting wings, a pearl hidden in the belly of a wheat grain, a horse singing opera by the river, a rat clenching a red flower with its teeth and proposing to a crow in the sky. The old man would listen and remark that for a sixty-year-old woman like her, she had an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old heart. The old man couldn’t understand how a woman who never dreamt at night in her youth could now have a tsunami of them in her late age.

“Hey, old bag! Where’d you go? I can’t see you. Say something!” the old man yelled.

The horse stood motionless, all four hooves pressed to the ground. It wondered why its master had not unloaded the cart and freed it of its fetters, so it could rest a while in the field.

When the old man couldn't hear the old woman's voice, he became very anxious. He thought she was under the cart and playing hide and go seek with him. When she was young, she often pranked him like this. The old man bent down all out of breath and could only see two muddy wheels. Other than that, there was nothing. Only then did he understand that the old lady must have been lost along the road. He blamed himself for not being more careful, only selfishly napping on his own. Perhaps, she got off on the way to relieve herself and then couldn't catch up with the horse cart. He quickly turned the cart around and returned to look for the old woman.

The horse, hearing the old man yell for the old woman, understood why he was tethered still. So when they started on the road, it did not slack, despite being so tired it could barely see straight. It trotted faster. The old man still thought that the horse was going too slowly. He had forgotten his whip, so he got off the cart, broke a willow branch, and began to whip the beast. The horse felt the smart of each lash with newfound sensitivity, having not been whipped for so long. It lowered its head and ran for its life. The frenzied old man wasn't satisfied. He continued to whip the horse until it saw stars.

After four *li* or so, on a stretch of road that was choked by yellow flowers on either side, they discovered the old woman. She lay horizontally on the road, as if sleeping. The old man yelled out, "Why are you sleeping on the road? You scared me to death!" He let out a long sigh and jumped off the cart to go move the woman. The horse was covered with sweat. The pain of its bloody body was so insufferable that all four of

its legs were knocking. The horse was not as optimistic as the old man to think she was merely sleeping on the ground. The horse knew the old woman only slept on the cart; she would have woken right up if she were uncomfortable on the ground. Even the sound of a cawing crow would wake her immediately, never mind the clear sound of an incoming horse cart. If she wasn't awake, she was dead.

Not surprisingly, when the old man turned the old woman over, her forehead was covered with blood. The ground was smattered with blood marks too. He slapped her cheeks, yelling, "My old bag, can't you say something!" The old woman was silent, no longer able to tell him of her fantastical dreams. The old man felt for her breath. Nothing. He reached for her rough hands. They were already as cold as river water in autumn. And her limbs had stiffened.

Though the old man was hard of hearing, a full decade older than the old woman, he knew she was dead. He did not cry. He only said, "How can you fly off, just like that?" He was now only embracing the shell of the old woman. The real her had withdrawn herself and left.

The breeze was unhurried in its movement, like tai chi: every punch or kick landed for a different effect. The wind that moved through the grass bent each blade at the waist. The wind that fell upon the yellow flowers stole threads of sweet aroma to give away to the passerby bird or butterfly. The last thing left moving on the old woman was her hair. That thin white head of hair danced slightly, as if she were using it to say goodbye to him. The old man breathed in the rich fragrance of flowers and said, sadly, "If you like this

patch of yellow flowers, just let me know. I will plant our entire garden with it, so you can have enough of them to love.”

The horse watched the old man struggle as he hoisted the old woman onto the cart and searched the road for the cause of the fall. They saw it at the same time. To the right of the road, there was a rock that jutted out, with a tip sharp like a bamboo shoot. That rock, gleaming with blood, played the murderous role.

“You demon sent from hell, I will kick you to death!” the old man roared and kicked the rock. The rock did not budge.

“You wolf fang, I will pull you up!” the old man howled again, bending down to pry the rock with his hands. The rock, the snagged, bloody tooth, continued to stare up at the old man, immovable, unperturbed.

“You eyeless bullet, I will smash your soul!” The old man saw that his punches and kicks had done nothing. He quickly went to his cart and retrieved a pickaxe, and began to passionately strike the rock. The rock could not hold on anymore, and at first, gave off a few cries, then a necklace of sparks, and finally it completely shattered in an instant.

The pickaxe was originally intended to dig up lily roots: the old woman had asthma, and often used them to cook congee. The old man gingerly set the pickaxe back on the cart. Then he touched the old woman’s face and cried.

They headed back towards the village. The old man no longer sat at the front. He was sitting in the back, holding the old woman in his arms. He thought she must have fallen from the cart when the bump in the road came. She had slept too soundly. As soon as

she fell, she must have hit that cursed rock right in the head and died soon after.

Such an unremarkable rock took her life. He could not understand. Did she die as soon as she fell? Did she call for him? If only his ears were still young and sharp. And the sound of the horse trotting must have blanketed and diminished every other sound. Thinking this, he began to blame the horse.

And the horse? It trotted, troubled. It blamed itself as well. The old woman must have fallen on the ground because it didn’t trot as smoothly as it used to. Sometimes a leg would seize up and the cart would bounce. She must have fallen because of it. And the unforgivable thing was the old man wouldn’t have felt a difference if the cart held one person fewer, because he wasn’t pulling it. The horse, however, should have felt the sudden loss of weight. But it didn’t. It didn’t notice at all. Ashamed, the horse thought that it might as well quit eating grass and kill itself.

They journeyed for around two *li* before the old man stopped the horse, commanding it to turn around and make way for Second River again. He realized that the old woman was dead. There was no use in taking her back to the village. She didn’t like it there. She liked the wheat fields of Second River. But not long after they turned back, he changed his mind again, because he remembered that the old woman’s coffin was at home. She would need to be in it before he could bury her properly. And so, he ordered the horse to turn again towards the village. The horse was exhausted, but it still carried out its master’s will faithfully. As such, they kept going until the temperature rose at high noon. The horse’s tongue had dried out, and at



Illustration by Wang Yan

that moment, the old man changed his mind again: he turned the horse around towards Second River. This time, it was because he wanted to bury her in a place she liked. He could leave her in the cabin and go home to get the coffin just the same. The horse returned to the very first trajectory again. Passing the place where the old woman fell was torturous for it. But the horse was kind and understanding, going whichever way its

master determined. No matter what, the master must have a rationale behind all his decisions. Two hours later, when they were very close to Second River, the old man changed his mind yet again. What if he left her body in the cabin and a bear or a wolf came and ate her? In her state, she couldn't fight back and would be swallowed whole by these beasts. The thought made him cringe with fear and he instantly turned

the horse again, towards the village. In any case, he thought, she should see the place where she had lived for so many decades. And just like that, the old horse spent the whole day without water or grass; the old man too, had nothing to eat. They traversed like this, back and forth along the road to Second River, until dusk, when they arrived at the village, dead tired.

After many more hurdles, the old woman was buried by Second River. Because the journey was too far, most of the mourners stopped by the edge of the village. The old woman would have been annoyed by a procession following her anyway. Their family of three consisted of him, the old woman and the old horse. There was no need for anyone else to come trailing along behind them.

The old horse hauled the red coffin along and the old man sat at the head of the cart once more. He listened to the horse's footfall and looked out at the grass and flowers on the moor, catching a birdcall or two in the distance on this sunniest of days. This trip, they went slow. The horse and the old man had a common wish; that was for the old woman to enjoy her favorite road trip one last time. When they passed the spot of the accident, the old man stopped the horse, got off the cart and went into the field to pick a bouquet of yellow flowers. He put it on her coffin. They continued ahead. The old man reminisced about the old woman's particular habits, from how she combed her hair, to the way her face looked when she was enjoying her meal. He even recalled her temper tantrums, and her furious glare when she threw down the broomstick. He missed her so much.

At Second River, the old man unloaded the horse

and took it to the river for a drink. And then he ate, and chose a plot. He dug. He thought that this grave plot had good feng shui: there were wheat fields to either side, the moor was in front and the river was to the back. He saw this as incomparable real estate: a place with eats, treats, and plenty of entertainment. As he dug the grave, the old horse hung by his side. He said to it, "She dies, I dig her a grave. If I die, can you dig me one?" The old horse used his hooves to kick up some dirt, meaning that his hooves would not lose out to a shovel in the end. The old man lovingly played with the horse's ear and said, "Thank you, brother."

The grave was finally finished at sunset. When the old man was prepared to bury the old woman, trouble arrived. He realized that he could not lower the coffin singlehandedly; back at the village, when the coffin was placed on the cart, a neighbor had helped. This time the old man complained to the old woman, "I wanted you to have a quiet trip and I kept people from coming along, but now I can't bury you alone. The horse can't help me like a man. Now what? There isn't a soul around here. Either I go back to the village, or you work some Monkey King type magic and make this coffin as light as paper so I can put you in there by myself."

The old man thought that his words might prove effective. In his mind, the old woman was omnipotent. If she could have such mystifying dreams, wouldn't making a coffin a bit lighter be a piece of cake? He paused a moment, then tried to lift the coffin, reinvigorated by his faith. But it only budged a sliver. He was near tears. He thought himself an idiot to have not brought anyone with him. The villagers were all

idiots too, for no one reminded him. But, perhaps they knew all along that this was not a possible task for one man, and since he had no son around, they intended to humiliate him.

Unsure what to do next, the old man remained hopeless while the sun rolled around and played in the sky until dusk. There must be dust in the firmament too. And that dust was a rusted red. That would explain why the sky was dressed in layer after layer of red flower petals. The old man said to the horse, you stay here and keep the old bag company. I will go back to the village this very night and find someone to come and help me. If I come back and find that a bear or a wolf has shredded her, there'll be consequences.

The horse uttered a long neigh and nudged the coffin with its mouth, as if to say: the old woman is nailed into such a thick coffin. How would any bear or wolf get to her?

With his flashlight and security tools in tow (hereabouts, you only need to defend yourself against wild beasts), the old man was ready to go when he suddenly saw the horse's ears flare a few times, opening like a bird's wings. It must have heard something odd. Alarmed, the old man looked down the road and saw nothing. The horse could be paranoid at times, so the old man prepared to leave once more. Just then, he saw a man on a horse approach from ahead. The old man's heart began beating wildly. He thought, how thoughtful of the old bag to send someone to a place no one frequented. In this hour of utmost need, someone was coming to help him. He was so thrilled he wanted to cry.

But it was Carpenter Wang, a man he hated. Car-

penter Wang rode a silver horse much younger and better looking than his. Carpenter Wang wore a set of neat blue clothes, and his horse was carrying fishing forks and fishing nets. He must be coming to Second River to fish.

"Can I help you?" Carpenter Wang hopped off his horse and said, loudly.

The old man hesitated for a second, but he swallowed his jealousy and said, "Please, can you lend a hand? I can't move this coffin by myself."

Carpenter Wang smiled. The old man felt that there was mockery in the smile. He was ten years younger than the old man, and his body looked strong. He could probably still polish off five bowls of rice looking like that. Back in the day, both he and the old man had liked the old woman. But the old woman chose him, a bachelor so impoverished no one had ever wanted to marry him in all his thirty some years. He still remembered how a brokenhearted Carpenter Wang had gotten horrendously drunk at their wedding, so drunk he fell beneath the table and people had to carry him home. It had spoiled the enjoyment of their wedding night. The old man had been resentful over this for years.

The old man asked Carpenter Wang to carry the foot of the coffin, and he would carry the head, even though he knew he had no strength for it. They ultimately switched places. When the two of them, huffing and puffing, lowered the coffin into the grave, the old man was so tired his legs shook violently. He felt horrible, knowing that it was Carpenter Wang who held the old woman's head in the end and that he only had her feet. His fragile body had failed again. The

old man sighed and stopped a moment. As soon as he began shoveling dirt into the grave, Carpenter Wang took the cue and walked away. He was off to the river to fish. The old man thought: Fishing must be his excuse – he must have known that I couldn't bury her alone. Besides, Carpenter Wang must have wanted to give a last send off to a woman he used to love. The old man continued to layer the hole with dirt as the golden rays of sunset blanketed the grave. He felt as if he were pouring the glorious light in himself and burying it with her. A great comfort tided over him.

Carpenter Wang didn't fish for long before he rode his horse back to the village, thus confirming the old man's theory. As the sky darkened, the old man left the grave plot and returned to the cabin, where he lit a kerosene lamp, started a fire, and, dumbly, began cooking. He tried to boil a bowl of noodles, but because he got the timing wrong, the noodles came out overcooked and broken. It was like a bowl of paste instead. He made do and finished the food, blew out the lamp, and rolled up a cigarette to smoke. He missed the old woman so much he wanted to find a boulder to dash his head against. Yet on the other hand, Carpenter Wang's visit today could truly be the doing of the old woman, who may have wanted to see him one final time as well. So she lured him here with her spirit. The old man suddenly felt as if she had been disloyal. He finished his smoke, and furrowed into the sheets to sleep. The next morning, he went to the wheat fields to work. He began work at sunrise and rested after sunset. He stayed there this way for a full week. He was now completing the labour of two people alone, so of course it took longer.

After he finished the farm work, he put the bridle on the horse to head back to the village. Just then, as he saw the pickaxe on the cart, he intuitively knew he had forgotten a task: digging up lily roots. He hurriedly shouldered the pickaxe and made his way to the moor, where he found a few lilies and plowed up their tender, white roots. He put them in his pocket and went home. When the horse cart passed the yellow flowers again, he remembered that the old woman was dead. No one would eat the lily roots anymore. Overwhelmed with grief, he took them out of his pockets and threw them to the side of the road, handful by handful.

The old man did not go out much after he returned to the village. His biggest challenge was the procurement of food. In the past, the old woman cooked for him. He only needed to open his mouth. Now, he faced the pots, pans, bowls and plates, dumbfounded. He didn't know how to cook rice or stir-fry anything, let alone make buns or dumplings. The village had an eatery that belonged to Zhang Jinlai. The old man had no choice but to go eat there. He didn't actually want to go: Zhang Jinlai was Carpenter Wang's son-in-law. The eatery was only busy during the tourist season. Typically, outsiders rarely visited the village and there weren't many weddings or funerals to keep it from closing its doors. When Zhang Jinlai was young, he once went to Second River to catch fish with dynamite. His explosives blew off one of his legs, and the disability meant he couldn't farm any more. He started the eatery as a result. Since he didn't have much going for him, he married Carpenter Wang's daughter Xuehua. Xuehua was born with polio. Her four extremities

were twisted like branches of a gnarly tree. When she walked, she shook as if she had springs beneath her feet. Neither husband nor wife could walk right, but their son was strong enough; when he ran, he looked perky as a pony. And the couple cared for each other, neither of them ashamed of the other. Don't think that they aren't hardworking just because they are handicapped. They have their own garden, with every vegetable imaginable, and they keep their own pigs, sheep, chicken, duck and all manner of livestock. The old man initially didn't like eating at their place, but he got used to it after a couple of days. In the morning, he went there for porridge; at noon, he went for a bowl of rice and a stir-fried dish, and at night, he returned for a shot of liquor, two dishes and a bun. A day's spending at the eatery totaled twenty *yuan* or so. The old man and the old woman had labored over the wheat for so many years that every year they had an income of a few thousand. He still had some savings. After all, their only son was still in jail. The old man hated his son to pieces and didn't want to leave him a single dime. Furthermore, his own funeral clothes and coffin had been paid for and reserved many years ago – he could afford to eat that way until he died. The only problem was that he often ran into Carpenter Wang at the eatery, when the man came to see his grandson. As soon as he walked in the door, he started shouting, "Where's my perfect grandson?" And at this point, no matter where the kid was playing, he would bolt this way like a tornado, yelling, "Grandpa! Grandpa!" The kid would run until he jumped into Carpenter Wang's embrace. The old man's heart soured with envy. He thought to himself, had his son not been such a waste

of space, wouldn't he be clutching his own grandson by now?

The old man's son was jailed twice for rape. This left the old couple no dignity in the village. Their son had been odd from birth. He didn't like socializing and was always by himself. He didn't even really like girls. When he dropped out of the high school in the city and came back home, the old man decided that his son would not escape the agricultural call and so began to try and find him a good match. One by one, the girls were introduced, and the boy turned down each of them. He said there was no point. He didn't want to marry. The old man and the old woman didn't think much of it. They figured he was just a late bloomer: when he wanted girls in the future, you wouldn't be able to stop him! One spring, the old man's chickens ran into their neighbor Xuemin's vegetable garden and polished off the few sprouts of spinach that she had just coaxed out of the ground. Xuemin was a forceful woman. The old man offered to compensate her loss in cash, and she refused. He offered to give her the chickens that had eaten her produce, and she refused again. She said that she would only be pacified if in a single night, the ground of her garden could grow the same exact spinach she used to have. She really knew how to be difficult. The old man's son didn't dawdle at all. He broke into Xuemin's house that same night and raped her. Xuemin's husband was on a trip for his nephew's wedding and was not back yet. Xuemin's five-year-old daughter watched her mother get raped and couldn't stop crying. The little girl ran out of the house to get help, and met Tailor Hu along the way. Tailor Hu followed her into the house and the

old man's son was caught in the act. Tailor Hu was a woman who relied only upon her craft and had never needed to worry about subsistence at all. She had a great circle of friends and was the object of envy for many women. She reported the rape on Xuemin's behalf. The old man's son was sentenced to nine years in prison. When the judge asked him why he raped the woman, he responded, "She was being unreasonable; rape was what she deserved!" When Xuemin's husband came home, many villagers criticized him for this and that, and so he divorced Xuemin and absolved himself of all responsibilities. That's why Xuemin hated her husband, hated the old man and the old woman, hated her daughter, and hated Tailor Hu. She hated that her husband did not reflect upon their years of marriage and abandoned her so cruelly, hated that the old man and the old woman had raised such a devilish son, hated that her daughter went out to get help, and hated that Tailor Hu reported it. She could have swallowed the private shame and pretended that nothing happened. That way, she would have held onto the image of a good wife. Sometimes, she also hated herself for being so hard on the old man's family. No devastation would have occurred had she not been so demanding. Honestly, she had a tough beak, that's all. She only wanted to extort a little more money in compensation. That was it. She didn't want their chickens, because she hated raising poultry. It always ended with chickens out the coup and a ground covered with feathers and broken eggs. But later on, she stopped hating Tailor Hu, mainly because Hu landed the same bitter fate of agony and ashes.

The old man and the old women started clear-

ing the land over at Second River and planted wheat shortly after their son was incarcerated. During that time, the horse had just been brought to their home. It was two years old. They took it up with them to plow and sow. Whenever the young horse wanted to rest, they whipped it mercilessly. They whipped and whipped until the horse hated that it was a horse. Why not a snake, a weasel or a bear? It would rather be any animal that could strike a little fear in the hearts of men.

Nine years later, the son finished his sentence and returned to the village. No one recognized him. He was tall, but abnormally gaunt and pale. He was even more reticent, spending most of his time with the horse. Sometimes, he even slept in the horse's stables. Only the horse knew that deep in the night, he wept. He often hugged the horse's head and spoke to it. The horse knew a thing or two about human language, but it didn't understand a single word of what this convict was saying. Just like this, within the year, he was imprisoned once again. This time, he raped Tailor Hu. One day, the old woman took her son to Tailor Hu to get a new pair of pants made. Tailor Hu refused to even measure him. She made it seem like touching him could endanger her life. The old woman begged her, "I'll keep my eye on him. What do you think he could do to you?" But Tailor Hu lifted her head with easy pride and said, "I am a clean person. I do not make sullied pants!" The old woman could only take her son home, humiliated. Tailor Hu had a milk cow. She really liked that cow and every night, she would go pick it up and walk it back to the village. The night after the old woman's son was refused his pants, he hid

in the pasture and waited for Tailor Hu to appear with her cow. As soon as she did, he pushed her down hard onto the grass and raped her soundly. This time, he turned himself in. When asked about his motives, he said, "Didn't she say she couldn't make sullied pants? I made her a sullied pair, just for her!" Tailor Hu, who had her reputation to consider, jumped into a well and killed herself. Since he had committed the same crime yet again, with even darker consequences (Tailor Hu's death), the son was sentenced heavily. Twenty years. He knew he would not be around to take care of his aging parents until their deaths. And so after his crime, he came home and embraced the horse, saying, "You take care of them now and see them off properly when they die." This was the only thing he said that the horse had ever understood.

The old man ate at the eatery. He came home at night to sleep on his earthen bed alone, and since it was too empty he moved into the horse's stalls. Strangely enough, he was not as lonely when he stayed with the horse. After his son went to prison for the second time, the old couple, without needing to verbalize their mutual decision, began treating their horse as a person, someone they could not part with.

The gentle sounds it made when it chewed grass brought tears to his eyes. He knew that this horse too was in his final years, much like himself. But he hoped that he died before the horse did. If the horse were to leave the world before him, what point would there be in him remaining alive?

Every other week or so, the old man bridled the horse and took the cart up to Second River. When they arrived, he unloaded the horse and went to see

the old woman. The horse followed him on this visitation. They stared blankly for a beat, and then each began his own work. The old man went to work in the wheat fields and the horse went wandering through the grasslands. Come evening, the old man lit the stove and made himself a bowl of noodles. The horse gazed upon the bright red flames and thought them to be the only flower to bloom at night. The old man slept in the cabin at bedtime and the horse slept on the grass outside. It liked to smell the dampness in the air and listen to the nameless insects whisper through the night. These were such comforting sounds. The horse thought of the old woman. She was the thoughtful one who often got up at night with a coat on her shoulders and came to see it. She brushed its hair. The old man was a little less organized in his senile state; he could barely take care of himself. He couldn't use soap evenly when he washed his clothes and his boiled noodles still came out as paste most of the time. When he got up in the morning out at the cabin, he didn't even bother to roll up his bedding. If you wanted to put up a scarecrow come autumn, you would need to go and cut down some grass now. But the old man was inert. The horse tried to remind him and one time, it even took a sickle in its mouth and brought it to the old man. The old man blinked and said, "Even if I am desperate for some meat to eat, I still wouldn't cut out your tongue!" The horse was truly out of ideas.

The grains of wheat grew more turgid by the day. The horse and the old man continued to travel back and forth between Second River and the village. One day, the old man met an artist from out of town. He was staying at Zhang Jinlai's house. People said he

could produce wondrous replicas of anything. The old man took out some money and gave the artist a photograph of the old woman. He asked for a portrait of her the size of the door for him. The artist accepted the task and asked him to come back for the piece in a week.

When that day came, the old man dressed in his neatest attire and even combed back his few locks of white hair with a wet comb to give it some shine. He walked towards that eatery feeling both shy and exhilarated, as if this were that first date he had with the old woman in the willow groves. He finally saw the old woman's portrait in a dark room. It was truly the size of a door. The rich colors of the oil paints were so juicy fresh they threatened to drip down. The old woman was grinning at him, a shawl around her shoulders, and an endless field of ripe wheat behind her. On the wheat fields, there was a shadow of a horse and a man. The old man decided that it must have been Carpenter Wang who provided these other details. How else would the painter have gotten such details right with such familiarity. The old man carried the painting home and wept the whole way. Joy expanded in his chest, as if his old woman had been lost and now he had finally found her again. His tears splashed upon the painting, and the painting grew livelier for it. The old woman looked like she had just stepped out of a bath in the river. The old man took the painting to the horse's stalls to show the old horse. It looked at it for a second and immediately tears came streaming down its face. It stretched out its tongue to lick the frame of the painting. It didn't lick the old woman's image for fear of the old man's jealousy. Finally, the old man hung the

painting on the west wall of the room, so that when the sunlight came in from the east, the painting shone in all its glory. The old woman would look like she was preparing to speak to him.

The old man died. The horse remembered very clearly that day when it went with the old man to Second River. Once they arrived, they stopped for a long time. The old man did not jump off the cart as usual. The horse turned its head and saw that the old man was not sitting at the front of the cart anymore. He was lying splayed out in the back, motionless. The horse knew that the old man must have breathed his last. The old horse did not hesitate: it turned around and made its way towards the village. It listened to the creaking wheels of the cart, looked at the increasingly overcast sky, and prayed that it wouldn't rain. That would wet its master. The horse whimpered as it trotted, pleading with the sky. The rainclouds seemed moved by the horse's sincerity. They gathered for a while, but then dispersed. The sun came out and the road resumed its playfulness in the light. The horse galloped upon the illuminated path, as if the road were covered with wild flowers. His four hooves were honeyed with the fragrance of it.

The old horse stopped the cart before the eatery. Only the horse knew that Carpenter Wang had so much respect and care for its master. The carpenter had loved the old woman his whole life. Only the horse saw how late at night, Carpenter Wang would pace outside its master's door. He was afraid others would see and only came out when everyone was sleeping. He was only there waiting for the old woman to come outside and dump the foot-washing water.

The nights were dark, and from where he was hidden across the yard he really couldn't see much, but he listened for the splashing sound of the water and her occasional cough. The old horse also remembered that when the master's son went to jail for the first time, the old woman was so angry she fell ill. Carpenter Wang went and caught a few fish, strung them together and threw them into the master's yard. The next morning, the old man discovered the string of fish and jubilantly announced to the old woman: Someone has secretly sent us fish! The old man thought it was just a kind soul who had sympathy for their plight. But the old woman knew the fish was from Carpenter Wang. Even though he married and had a son of his own, he still could not let her go. He didn't need to express it with words. And of course, the horse knew that Carpenter Wang came especially to Second River to help bury the old woman. Fishing was an excuse. The old horse remembered how Carpenter Wang pretended to leave the grave plot lighthearted, but in truth, had hidden his full wells of tears. Afterwards, he was more likely letting his tears run in the river than doing any actual fishing.

Carpenter Wang buried the old man at Second River, next to his beloved old woman. When the attendees left the funeral, Carpenter Wang quietly picked a bouquet of wild flowers and laid it before the old woman's tombstone. He whispered, "I had wanted to give you flowers a long time ago. I never had a chance. From now on, every summer, I will come pick flowers for you."

The village chief came out and sealed off the old man's house, saying the rights to the place should be-

long to that rapist still serving his time. Who knew if he would have the good fortune to come back and inherit it. As for the horse, everyone saw that it was very old and could no longer do any farm work. They decided to kill it and share the meat. On the day of the horse's scheduled killing, the butcher came early and found no horse in the stalls. He asked the village chief. The village chief said the animal and its master were inseparable. Perhaps it had run off to Second River. No one wanted to make a trip to Second River just to fetch an aged horse. They all agreed that even if the horse were killed, the meat had to be so old and tough that it wouldn't soften even after a full day's boiling. It couldn't have tasted that good anyway, so people forgot about the horse.

Autumn came and the wheat had yellowed to perfection. Because there was no scarecrow, the birds came in waves. The old horse, now just skin and bones, struggled to chase them away. But as soon as he chased away one wave of birds, another set in. The birds considered these fields to be their amusement park. The old horse thought it had disappointed its master. To chase away the birds, it ran along the fields, out of breath and ever-weakening. It knew its life was about to reach its end. One day, the old horse returned from drinking at the river and found two figures on the fields. Two women. It was Xuemin and her daughter. Xuemin was already old and full of wrinkles. After her divorce, no one wanted to marry her again, and so she lived with her daughter Yinhua. Yinhua was twenty-one, a pretty thing, but rather dull of intellect. She never graduated from high school and came back home to farm. The old horse knew that all the

items that went missing around the house were taken by Xuemin. She had believed for so long that her life had turned to tragedy because of the old man's family. And so, if she ever needed rice, she would go to the old man's storage hut to take some. If she needed firewood, she would send Yinhua to steal some from them. The old man and the old woman had lost too many things to count and decided to stay up at night and observe. When they discovered that the thief was Xuemin, they really couldn't do much about it.

Xuemin was ecstatic that the old man and the old woman had died before harvest. To her, this harvest was undoubtedly what she deserved. She came with two sharp sickles and began to cut down the wheat with her daughter Yinhua. Xuemin had already contacted a buyer. She was planning on selling the wheat, then going to town and buying herself a china blue silk, cotton-lined winter coat. She would buy Yinhua a pair of corduroy pants and save the rest of the money. But just after Xuemin cut down a tiny patch of wheat, the old horse came out to attack her. It had hurried over from across the river and used its hooves to kick at Xuemin's waving sickle. Xuemin almost didn't recognize this horse. It was so thin, the loose skin of what once was its stomach swayed left and right like a bell when it trotted. It stood before her shivering, like a patient with a bad flu. But its eyes were clear as water.

"You're more loyal than a dog, huh?" Xuemin said to the old horse, "Your master is dead. They abandoned you. Why do you still take care of their business?" She set down the sickle. Xuemin stopped working, but Yinhua was still waving her sickle and the old horse went up to stop her. And when Yinhua straight-

ened up to speak to the horse, Xuemin started to cut again. Yinhua said, "If you dare to kick me once, I will cut off your legs and roast you tonight." The old horse did not kick Yinhua. It kicked her sickle and it fell. Yinhua picked up her sickle and quickly sliced at the horse's foreleg. It was too old to dodge. Immediately, the old horse collapsed on the wheat field and blood spurted out from its forelegs, dyeing red the freshly cut wheat.

Xuemin saw that the horse was down and burst into song. When her voice fell, the birds came, and they sang some more. The old horse never stood up again. It listened to the swishing sound of the wheat being razed down, and its tears fell down like dew.

Xuemin and Yinhua still wanted some more fun after they had eaten that night. They roasted some of the new grains of wheat. The fresh wheat was so delicious that they ate like no tomorrow. Yinhua asked her mother if they should slaughter the horse, since it was going to die anyway. It looked a little pitiful lying there, bleeding out like that. Xuemin replies, "Don't even think about letting it die so easily! Their family owes us too much!"

"It is just a horse, not a man," said Yinhua.

"It could be just a horse in anyone else's family, but to their family, this was a man!" Xuemin screamed. The old horse lay like that and listened to them cut down their wheat for three days, and then he died silently. When Xuemin and Yinhua were planning to skin the horse and scrape off some good meat to roast, Carpenter Wang appeared at Second River. He said he was here to fish. He saw Xuemin preparing to skin the horse and tried to dissuade them, saying, "Isn't it

enough that you took their entire harvest? This horse was their most beloved animal. Why not just dig a grave and return their pet?”

Xuemin didn't want any problems before the wheat was sold and so she took Carpenter Wang's advice. Carpenter Wang dug a grave and buried the old horse next to the old man and the old woman. No one would ever guess that of the three mounds in this small cemetery, one mound held a horse.

On the final dusk of harvest, Xuemin went to the cabin to cook. Yinhua said she wanted to work a little longer. When it got dark and dinner was ready, Xuemin went out to call Yinhua. Yinhua came slowly. Though there was no light, Xuemin saw that her daughter walked with an uneasy limp and falter. Xuemin thought that it must be that she was too tired, until her daughter came close enough. That's when she knew something was wrong. Her hair was unruly, her clothes were ripped and her face bore many tear streaks.

“What happened?” Xuemin asked apprehensively.

“A man. He appeared in the field. He raped me!” Yinhua started to wail.

Xuemin felt the room begin to spin. She fell limp to the ground. Yinhua said the man wore a black mask with only his eyes, nose and mouth showing. She could not tell what he actually looked like, but just remembered that he was strong, his breathing was heavy and that his body smelled like horses.

Could it be him, Xuemin wondered. That old man's son smelled like horses. But he was still in jail! Had he broken out? Or was his sentence commuted? If it wasn't him, who else could it be?

“I hate this wheat!” Yinhua screamed between sobs.

“This thing, you just go on and pretend it didn't happen, you hear me? Don't tell anyone!” Xuemin said, in tears and slapping her leg, “Just pretend that it was a ghost that came along and raped you!”

They cried for another while, and then went back to eating. The next morning, they finished cutting down the last of the wheat. Then they sat on the bald land and looked down upon their dulled sickles.

Translated by Karmia Olutade



Photo by Matthew Niederhauser

阿乙

A Yi

A Yi worked as a police officer, secretary and editor before settling down at the age of 32 to the fiction he always knew he would write. A Yi did not appear in print until his first collection of short stories, *Grey Stories*, was published in 2008. This was followed in 2010 by *The Bird Saw Me*, which developed A Yi's bizarre literary style and utterly unsentimental worldview. His first novel, *A Perfect Crime* (also available in English translation), is a cat-and-mouse story of a nihilist young murderer leading the police on a merry chase.

In the Penal Colony

By A Yi

If there is a power in heaven, and it bends its merciful gaze upon us, the oceans will seem as ditches, mountain ranges like whale vertebrae, the police station of Aocheng like a scrap of fruit peel, and the table within it no bigger than a silk-worm egg. At the northern and southern edges of this table sit Xiao Li and myself, interns from the police academy, while to east and west are seated Constable Wang and his driver. These four minuscule personages are playing a game of Double Up in the warm light of the sun.

Back then it was cards every day. I'd slept poorly the night before, and had to be dragged to the card table. Nothing seemed unusual at first, but gradually things started to feel a bit surreal.

Some popular proverbs can be pretty surreal, too, like the one about needing a century of good karma just to share one boat ride. A man boards a ferry, going to collect a debt on behalf of his father; a woman boards the same ferry, going to see a doctor on the opposite bank. The two begin as complete strangers, yet when they reach the other side they go directly to the civil affairs office to get married. Meanwhile Xiao Li and myself, and a whole heap of people like us, have come to intern at the Shishan police academy, for no other reason than that the son of the Shishan County Public Security Bureau bureau chief failed his college entrance exams by just a few points. The police academy made a special exception for the noble scion, and the father repaid the generosity by providing intern opportunities in Shishan County to academy students. Thus so I departed the enchanting wonderland of

the provincial capital and came to the strange land of Shishan County, and finally, with a flick of the Shishan County Public Security Bureau Political Work Section section chief's pen, was deposited in Aocheng, where the asphalt is filled with drying pomelo peel.

Here in this pit I had the misfortune of meeting the fifty-year-old Constable Wang. By rights the normal course of a civil police officer's career should run: rural police station – criminal investigation team – cushy spot in the provincial bureau. But Constable Wang had done it the other way round: a long career of demotions that eventually landed him in a rural police station. As the driver put it, Constable Wang had developed “character flaws”: first a certain payment had gone missing while he was at the provincial bureau; then he'd been implicated in the escape of a female suspect while in the criminal investigation team; finally he'd been tucked away here like a used dishrag. While Wang was in the police station he was continually cursing those who had sent him there. He said he once took a woman to a bath-and-massage place in the county capital, and halfway through the door had been kicked in by discipline inspection bureau officers sweeping for prostitutes. “Take a good look, you stupid fuckers: this is my wife. She's my wife!”

Perhaps it was this unusual form of banishment that had turned Wang into a monster. As I walked past his office I often heard wretched shouts and moans from inside: a thief would scream, then Wang would growl in a peculiar voice, “Scream for me, He Yaodong.” A gambler would scream, and Wang would say in the same voice, “Scream for me, He Yaodong.” He Yaodong was



Illustration by Wang Yan

the chief of the police station.

When Wang wasn't at the station, he was sure to be roaming the countryside in the Jeep. He'd return in an alcoholic euphoria, practically tumescent. The driver said they'd burned a half-tank of gas just so he could pocket a bribe of cigarettes. Red Plums, to boot – they were only four-and-a-half per pack to begin with.

The station chief and the officers with prospects wanted nothing whatsoever to do with Wang. They'd made it very clear up front – we're colleagues, nothing more. Wang seemed resentful. But now he was probably thanking heaven for sending him two young interns: now he had someone to clutch with his talons, to rail at, to dispatch on long treks to fetch useless

documents, to dispatch on a second trek after they'd come back from the first. He derived something of a jailer's satisfaction from all this. Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead* has the following line: "If a prisoner is assigned to continually repeat some meaningless work, for instance pouring water from bucket A into bucket B, then pouring the water back into bucket A, he will, after sufficient time, be sure to commit suicide." That's exactly how I felt at the time.

And so Wang is grasping the cards in his left hand with his right, wavering on the verge of playing them. He thinks, and thinks, pawing through the discard pile on the table, but the more he looks the more he hesitates. I'm thinking, all you've got is a couple of ten of clubs, anyway. I'm exhausted, I didn't sleep all night.

In the warm bath of the afternoon sunlight my eyes are drifting closed, I am drifting into vagueness, when I finally hear a resounding slap: A pair of tens!

I struggle to open my eyes, then pull out my own pair of clubs and toss them down – “that beats them.” Wang growls, “What the hell are you playing at?” I look more closely – it wasn’t a pair of jacks I’d laid down, but a jack and a queen. I hurriedly pull out another jack, but Wang’s talons are already extended to block me. “Who do you think you’re fooling, young man?” My temper rises, but the flood of anger surges no farther than my throat. I know my place. But the fury was real, and powerful – what was wrong with me? I’m normally mild-mannered.

Wang can’t help grinning as he takes the twenty points; the wind blows past that twitchy grin as though it caressed a eunuch who’d been rewarded with gold. That’s the end of this round; I hear his voice, rich with *schadenfreude*, say: Dog!

I flush, then crawl under the table, where Xiao Li is already crouched, shaking his head in resignation. Round after round ends the same way, with a querulous voice declaring: Dog! Gradually I grow numb; this seems to be my fate; even when I win one round, I still find myself automatically preparing to crouch.

Wang bursts out laughing. “Look at you, you really are a little mutt. You can’t help squatting!”

As I straighten up, the frozen flood of rage thaws and surges again. I hurriedly shuffle, and say, Draw. Wang takes a card, he licks spit from his lip, he’s absolutely disgusting. *You shit*, I think, *You’re not getting away with it again*. He continues as before, playing cards as if he were playing Go, spooling out my patience with his long, tedious mulling. But I’ve made up my mind, and each time he plays his cards I slap mine down immediately after. He plays a pair of sevens, I follow with a pair of eights. He plays two kings, I play two aces. He wants to retract the cards he’s played,

I pin them firmly to the pile. Xiao Li kicks me a few times under the table, but I am suddenly reckless.

At first Wang plays along with my aggression, but then he sees the fixed look in my eyes and soon he’s furious too, throwing down cards with a vengeance, as if he’s determined to crush me into submission on a field of battle. But the points are piling up incontrovertibly on my side. As I pass 80 points his face grows ugly, and he’s wax-white by the time I reach 140. He’s not done for yet, though – he doesn’t have to dog unless I reach 160, and his dignity may still be safe. I’m halfway expecting it when he tells me, “I won’t be dogging that easily” – he’s got powerful luck.

I’m holding the highest king, and the last pair at the table. That pair will turn the five points in Wang’s discard pile into twenty points. People with five points in their pile are all like that: arrogant, petty, narrow-minded, boastful, vulnerable. And yet he says, “Why don’t you take these five points.” With that laughable statement, my glorious destination rises before my eyes; I am so happy I can hardly stand it.

Sure enough, his third-to-last play isn’t the king in his hand. I slap down my own king, and then the pair. Wang is left gaping. I flip over the discard pile, fish out the five of diamonds, and say: Dog. The beads of sweat rush through Wang’s thinning hair like starving mice. A moment later the old loser’s eyes shift, and he switches a card into his hand, saying: “Not so fast, young man. I’ve got a pair that beats yours.”

I’m on my feet. “Where did you get a pair from? I laid down that queen you just stole on my first round. Dog.”

He looks like a thief when the lights suddenly blaze on overhead: nowhere to run. Almost beseechingly he says: “You’ve got it wrong, you’ve got it wrong.” My crisp return: “Dog!”

At first I think he won’t yield. But then he orders his driver to hoist up the table a bit, and ducks under.

This is the moment I've been waiting for, but now that it's come it holds no pleasure for me, as though an actual dog were simply passing me by. I sit down woodenly, my eyes a little damp, and retreat back into my numb and uncaring mood, back to tossing out cards at random. Wang, meanwhile, snuffles around the card table like an enraged jackal.

I'm not remotely interested in his petty revenge. When he tells me to dog I dog; my temper is spent. But that infuriates him further – he wants me to behave like a woman being ravished, clawing at the sheets, howling for my life, sobbing with humiliation. But I expose my sex numbly, like a dead fish, not even bothering to curse “fuck you fuck you”. Once I even come out from under the table wearing a slight smile – I don't know why, I can't control my strange mood. Wang glares nervously at my at my grin, sure he is being mocked.

I fold up my hand, and listlessly say: “That's enough, I'm sleepy.”

“No way,” is his ironclad response.

I'm like a sheet on the drying line, floating this way or that as the wind blows. I play whatever cards I happen to have, my head gradually drawing closer to the table, and finally I follow my exhaustion into another world. Immediately afterwards I feel a sharp pain in my shoulder. I haul my head upright, stare at Wang, say: “Let go.”

“You play your cards,” Wang answers viciously.

I come down on him like a ton of bricks. I play two of the tractors in my hand, and use the third to turn over the discard pile, bumping my points to 170. I'm not doing it on purpose, it's just that my cards are too good – I couldn't lose if I tried. It's better this way, though – the game will be won soon, I'll excuse him from dogging, then I'll go back to bed. Yet somehow, what comes floating out of my mouth is: “Dog.” Wang doesn't react. I look at him – he's wiping sweat from

his face, trying to think of some strategy to preserve his dignity. I know he'll come up with something. The monster lusts after cards the way he lusts after women; he'd soon come roaring back to life. I was merely an intern, after all, there to be bullied.

He raps the table. “You're not playing properly.”

“Are you going to dog or not,” I say faintly.

His rapping grows faster, as if to inform me of his mounting anger. “You're not playing properly. It's all because you're not playing right.”

“Okay,” I say. “Then I'm done playing.”

With that, I stand. But I have to admit I've misread Wang a bit: as I make to leave, he pushes the table back and, puffing, makes his way under it. Up until this very moment, it's all part of normal life in a rural police station.

But misery is washing over me, driving me to greater determination. I know that Wang will use further card games to mount a mad counterattack upon me, I know that I won't be allowed to leave until I've dogged a dozen times, but suddenly I'm not having it, it's like he's slapping us over and over, it's an absurd and never-ending task, no different than Sisyphus rolling his rock up the hill. If I'm not firm, I'll never make it out of this tedious loop. I'm not your lamb, Constable Wang.

As Wang begins to shuffle excitedly, I voice my decision. “I'm not playing. Game's over.” Then I head out for the toilet, not looking back. Ahead of me is a narrow, ten-meter-long concrete path, crowded by fat cabbages and an abandoned motorbike. Instructor Wu's wife has hung her sheets to dry, and they're shifting under the bright sun. The bees printed on the sheets are sitting, wings spread, on a big red flower with six petals and twelve soft yellow pistils in the center. But there are a pair of eyes in the back of my head, too, and they see the countless white hairs sprouting from Wang's scalp, they see his body begin to shudder,

see him struggle to hold himself upright, and the fire of humiliation rising in his eyes. He pulls out a bulky type 54 pistol.

During shooting practice at the police academy, I learned that a type 54 is bulkier than a type 64, and that that extra weight makes it easier to aim, and more deadly. My broad back is now the target, and the target is forcing itself to move steadily down the concrete path, ready to be punctured at any moment. In such a perfect shooting gallery, not even the worst shot could go amiss.

I hear a voice panting behind me: "Stop right there. You're done playing? Are you trying to be funny? Stop there."

I hear an agitated voice coming from behind: "Don't, he's just a kid! He's a kid!"

Then I hear the slide being racked, a bullet entering the chamber.

My legs tremble slightly, as though I were in the grip of a terrible hunger, but I keep moving steadily towards the toilet. The wall of the toilet bears the character: *male*. This ridiculous Chinese character seems at once near and far; time has frozen; my back is soaked; I am waiting for the bullet's whine.

My legs are on automatic, though, and I finally reach the shade of the far wall, like a soldier reaching his bunker. The monster has failed. He doesn't know what to do with that gun. If he puts it away he'll lose face, if he just stands there holding it he'll lose face, too. In the end it must have been the driver who firmly replaced his pistol in its holster. "What are you doing?" Wang snapped, but didn't prevent the driver from his good deed.

Inside the toilet are two long wooden boards over a cesspit. Maggots strive to swarm up out of this dead sea, crawling halfway up the sides then sliding back in. I pull a crumpled letter from my pocket, and squat on the boards without dropping my pants. Moments later

I am sobbing.

It is a letter to "Mr Ai Shikun of the Aocheng Police Station."

When I received the letter yesterday, and saw the "Mr", I nearly fell apart. I tore it open, various forebodings falling one by one into place. What it meant was that, beginning that day in 1995, I was in true exile. The girl had spent a half-hour wracking her brains over kind words to say to me, then felt she was giving me the wrong impression, so followed up with some severity. Then she thought she might have overdone it, and went back to kindness. She probably had no idea that the end result was as robust as a court verdict, and followed the standard framework of: "Your behavior... leading to consequences of... in light of this..."

Her meaning was all too plain.

My sustained pursuit (harassment) of her, along with my first experience of love, and my entire existence on this earth, had all been judged illegal. This all happened on an afternoon two years ago. A man boards a ferry, going to collect a debt on behalf of his father; a woman boards the same ferry, going to see a doctor on the opposite bank. The two begin as complete strangers, and when they reach the other side the man has fallen in deep and unrequited love. Well that's the end of that. That's the fucking end of that.

I throw the letter in the cesspit, wipe my tears, and go out. The sun is blurred. A little way off, the driver and Xiao Li are receiving a tongue-lashing from Constable Wang on the subject of the empty arrogance of youth. I knew I'd broken his spine, but I decided to lower my head and avoid his gaze, to show fear.

I'd save a little face for my elders.

Translated by Eric Abrahamsen



王剛

Wang Gang

Wang Gang is a writer and screenwriter, with novels such as *Back of the Moon* and *English*, and film scripts including *Dream Factory* and *A World Without Thieves*, which won the Golden Horse Prize for Best Screenplay Adaptation. *English*, based on his childhood experiences growing up in Xinjiang during the Cultural Revolution, has been published in five languages, including English. Wang's experiences as a real estate developer are the inspiration for the novel *The Curse of Forbes*, a no-holds-barred romp through the world of the rich and infamous in China's murky business milieu.

Wang Gang: My Writing is Self-Satire

Interviewed by Shu Jinyu

In 1987 Wang Gang published the novella A Bogda Fairy Tale in the magazine Beijing Literature. After reading it, the critic Li Tuo told him: "This is the best piece of fiction written about the Cultural Revolution, but you wrote it too early, while you were still too young. If you'd waited another twenty years it would have been even better."

Seventeen years later Wang Gang wrote English. Unfortunately, by that time Li Tuo was in Germany, and he has probably not had the chance to read the novel or hear the praise heaped upon it by readers and critics. A fascinating portrait of an era that was repressive yet full of innocence, English was voted "Best Novel of the Year" for 2004 by readers and critics alike. Zhang Yiwu praised the book for "offering a glimpse of the Chinese dream of our youths, for stimulating recollection, reconsideration, and nostalgia, and for prompting us to ponder and reflect upon an era that was shuttered and monotonous, yet innocent and earnest. Without meaning to, Wang Gang touches our hearts where they are most tender."

English is a meditation on the themes of growth and death, with tenderness and cruelty providing the tonic note. The vast Tianshan Mountains are suffused by the light of Wang Gang's childhood, and snowflakes flutter in the

boundless sky over Urumqi. Many people have already forgotten their childhood memories, but Wang Gang immerses himself in a personal revolt against forgetfulness. But there is not a happy memory for every season. According to Yi Fan, at a time when Henry Miller's work was gaining popularity everywhere, Wang Gang, like Yeats, began to feel tenderness toward all those time-scarred faces.

Shu Jinyu: Ten years ago, your novel *English* won both the Readers' and Critics' Choice awards in *Dangdai* magazine's "Best Novel of the Year" competition. I gather that this is the first time your work has won a prize?

Wang Gang: I didn't expect it. I'm not a modest person, but really, I didn't expect it.

In my acceptance speech I made a remark that got a few laughs. I said that back then, because my last name is Wang, I wished that Wang Meng had been my father. In those days writers were like gods to me. I once traveled all the way from Nanjiang in Xinjiang to Beijing to stand at Wang Meng's door, in hopes of meeting him. When I did, I asked, "After all these years, do you feel that you live in Liu Shiwu's shadow?" He gave me an honest answer, and said he

hoped I would become a good writer. Twenty-four years later, he's an old man, and I'm already over forty. But that memory still moves me deeply. Of course, now I know that having a good "grandfather" doesn't guarantee you'll become a good writer. Nor am I very confident as far as prizes go. What's different now, though, is that there's a system to guarantee impartiality. It's public and transparent, with media oversight. But I'm still not that confident. I used to believe that in China, only epic stories could win prizes. And *English* isn't that kind of novel – or rather, it's a different kind of "epic." Furthermore, the people who won the prize in the past were all literary insiders, all more visible than I. When the results were announced, I was incredibly grateful. I felt like anything could happen, and realized that the scope of my imagination before had been quite limited.

Shu: Can you describe the book for those who haven't read it? It's generally considered a *bildungsroman*; is that how you would identify it? There have been so many novels about growing up written both in China and abroad throughout the years. You must have some given the form some thought.

Wang: In the town of Urumqi, at the foot of the Tianshan Mountains, a group of boys and girls come of age in an era of material and intellectual poverty. They meet an English teacher, a martyr-like figure

whose grace and benevolence make an impression on a boy named Liu Ai, kindling in him a strong love for the English language. Together he and this English teacher weather a difficult, emotionally complicated time. Meanwhile, the teenage Liu Ai feels strong emotions of both attachment and rebellion toward his parents, who are persecuted intellectuals. He doesn't see them as just helpless victims; both their character and appearance are ambiguous.

I didn't associate the phrase "coming of age" with *English* till after it was written. It started with a remark by the director Lu Chuan, who had wanted to film a coming-of-age story. But I really didn't think about it that way when I wrote it. The critic Meng Fanhua called the book "China's first and only coming-of-age novel." I was pleased to hear that. If we're putting it in those terms, then I should mention the Italian movie *Cinema Paradiso*, which made a deep impression on me. There was also *Catcher in the Rye*, Mo Yan's *POW!*, Yu Hua's *Cries in the Drizzle* – all great coming-of-age novels. *Dark Side of the Moon* has held up well over time, but there's no sadness in that book.

Shu: What inspired you to write *English*? How long did it take?

Wang: From vision to completion, about eight years. I remember my friend Gong Yingtian, who adapts Jin Yong novels for TV, sitting in the little

courtyard of my building, kicking at the grass I'd spent hours trimming and saying, "It wasn't until you got high blood pressure that you finally understood sympathy." Now you can finally center yourself and write novels. I realize what he meant was that only the sick can understand the sick. But when he said it, I'd already had the vision for the novel for a long time; the characters had been coalescing in my imagination for many years. In my acceptance speech I said that in today's commercialized society, I can find no commercial elements in this book. I wrote it purely for myself. Writing a book for oneself alone is a decadent thing to do. You need to be prepared for it, both materially and mentally. Fortunately I met both of those conditions.

Two years ago, during the winter, I went back to Urumqi. I like to walk aimlessly through the city, discovering familiar things from my childhood in unexpected places. As always, snowflakes filled the air and the Tianshan Mountains gleamed in the distance; there was the same E-shaped building and the same old elm trees. I always run into a few of the teachers. They are all so young now, young enough to be my students. Am I really older now than my teachers were then? Zhou Yan, Huang Xusheng, Liu Changjiang, Wang Bing, Niu Jianshi, Xie Da... I wonder, have they become as nostalgic as I am? Have they read the book? All of them are gone now, I haven't seen a single one. I don't know if I'm putting clearly into words the emo-

tions I felt before I began writing *English*. But I knew then that I would start writing soon.

Shu: In the late eighties your stories *Cold Sunlight* and *A Bogda Fairy Tale* drew a lot of attention. One critic said that you had "flown under the radar" in Chinese literary circles for two decades. What do you take that to mean? Can you describe your creative history?

Wang: The best example of that might be *Dark Side of the Moon*.

After I got my master's degree I spent some time drifting around Beijing. During that period I wasn't cooped up in a study, but out and about, making my way in society. In 1996 the company I worked for successfully issued a bond jointly with a bank; I remember it was for thirty million RMB. Our boss said we could take some time off. I can't express how poignant that moment was; John Lennon's "Let It Be" was playing over and over in my mind, and I saw myself in Urumqi at twenty years old, walking in the dead of night through a driving snowstorm to Meng Fei's house to listen to the John Lennon album he'd brought back from the United Arab Emirates. I was wading through snow, my head filled with those songs, when I decided I would write a novel. Unfortunately, *Dark Side of the Moon* didn't get much attention when it came out. The TV adaptation that Wang Shuo and Feng Xiaogang

made with Feng Yuanzheng and Xu Fan didn't get broadcast widely because the executives intentionally clamped down on the series. So the comment that I mostly "flew under the radar" is accurate.

Shu: Liu Xinwu writes that your narrative strategy, or rather your narrative voice, doesn't begin as a rational argument, but rather as a purely emotional impulse bubbling up from the depths of your heart. He writes that it's exactly what he was yearning for, and what he recommends to readers. Has your prose style or narrative strategy changed at all during the twenty years you've been writing fiction?

Wang: Not that I've noticed. What I want to stress, though, is that I haven't tried to change, I just write in the way that feels most comfortable to me. If you read *English*, then go back and read *A Bogda Fairy Tale*, you'll see that I haven't changed at all.

Shu: What is writing, to you?

Wang: There was a long stretch when I was completely idle. I had no spiritual support, nothing to fill my days. *English* encouraged me to keep writing, and of course I wanted to.

Penguin Group bought the rights to English and put out an English translation of the novel, and The Curse of Forbes had a first print run of 100,000 copies. But the

real Wang Gang prefers the quiet life of the writer's studio to the hurly burly of the outside world. He likes to read old books, secondhand books, and Soviet novels. The Curse of Forbes invites readers to step into the shoes of the real estate tycoons featured in the novel; Wang is unsparing in his depiction of them, and his introspection and sharp critical eye make The Curse of Forbes a work whose influence extends beyond literary circles.

Shu: How did your attitude toward writing change after the success of *English*?

Wang: At the time I had two options: write another novel based on the same material, or stop writing entirely. *English* brought me back into the literary limelight, and won me the approval of people who hadn't approved of me before. That encouraged me to keep writing. Zhou Changyi at *Dangdai* magazine kept urging me to write about my experience in business. Only you can write those stories, he said. But I was worried that a book like that would come too close to being "office fiction," and lack literary value. But Zhou said, "To write about a nation's development during a particular era is to depict the original sin of a social class." That idea was the impetus to start writing *Forbes*.

Shu: Popular opinion seems to be that *The Curse of Forbes* limits its critique to the excesses of real estate

“capitalists”.

Wang: The book does criticize “capitalists”, but it’s not limited to that. Think of all the time and energy real estate developers have spent writing books, going on TV, giving interviews to reporters, just to shore up their own images. How could one novel destroy the image they’ve taken such pains to create? What I cared more about was faithfully and believably portraying several “capitalist” characters, capturing their helplessness, the hardships they face, and the desolation behind the bright façade.

I hope that this novel will at least serve as a reminder to take the perspective of “capitalists” seriously, and to be skeptical of their “performances”; and I hope that they will see their own reflections in it. Ordinary Chinese people ought to feel an affinity with certain characters. As far the image of “capitalists” goes, I hope that the reading public will believe my portrayal over those they see on TV. Readers think I’m writing about clowns, but a clown can be a force to be reckoned with! The developers think I’m satirizing them, but people who are familiar with my work know that it’s actually self-satire. Even in my screenplays, like *Dream Factory* and *A World Without Thieves* – and in *English* as well – I often make fun of myself.

Shu: Which authors or works have had the profoundest influence on you?

Wang: Among Chinese authors, Wang Meng and Liu Xinwu. As far as my own generation goes, I like Yu Hua’s and Liu Zhenyun’s novellas.

Shu: What are your thoughts on translation?

Wang: Howard Goldblatt translated *The Curse of Forbes*, and his enthusiasm for Chinese literature and careful attention to the text really impressed me. The care with which he considers language, and his dedication to understanding the meaning of what I wrote, made me feel sheepish at times. The translator reads the book so much more closely than the author does. As for mistranslation, I’m not worried about it. Good books don’t rely on language to conquer the reader. When I read Chinese translations of Tolstoy and Kafka, it’s never the language that moves me, but the plot, the conflicts. I don’t imagine my books are that hard to translate. The reason Goldblatt and others spend so much time on them is that they take their job so seriously.

Translated by Austin Woerner



蘇童

Su Tong

Born in 1963 in Suzhou and now living in Nanjing with his family, Su Tong is a bestselling author who attained international recognition in 1993 when Zhang Yimou's film of his novella, *Raise the Red Lantern*, was nominated for an Academy Award. He has a number of translations in English, including *Madwoman on the Bridge*, his first collection of short stories to be published, his novel, *Check*, a violent drama set in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, published by Doubleday in 2009, and *Boat to Redemption*, shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in the same year.

Early One Sunday Morning

By Su Tong

Mr. Li woke up at about five in the morning, he couldn't remember if his neighbour's rooster had woken him, or whether it was Mrs. Li, prey to nightmares, whose leg had pressed down on him, he could only remember that something had struck him heavily on the chest, and then he was awake.

This was early one morning in late spring, and what's more it was a Sunday. Today Mr. Li wouldn't have to rush, marking students' homework while he boiled congee on the coal stove. Mr. Li nudged the corpulent Mrs. Li gently aside and then got hold of two of the four slippers below the bed. The right foot felt too tight, and upon more careful observation it proved to be a woman's slipper, so he made the necessary switch. Despite this, as Mr. Li walked out into the courtyard, he was in a pleasant frame of mind, for Sunday mornings always put Mr. Li in a particularly consolatory and compassionate mood.

The oleander was in dazzling bloom, a few beads of dew hiding in the buds and leaves. As Mr. Li loosened the soil around these inexpensive flowers with a small knife, he suddenly recollected instructions Mrs. Li had given him the night before, to buy pork knuckle. With a mutter, Mr. Li jumped up and went back inside, found the market basket and shouted at the woman on the bed, I'm off to buy the pork knuckle. Then he walked his old bike, creaking and squeaking, outside onto Mahogany Road.

Mr. Li was the guy who rode the bike. Whether he was off to work teaching at the school, or running to the store for cigarettes and matches, or heading to

the public bathroom when nature called, he always got there on the old bike with the peeling blue paint.

The round bike lock was already badly rusted, but Mr. Li hadn't got a new one, instead he used a homemade chain lock made from wire and a broken padlock, so wherever he cycled a clanking sound pursued him.

The patchy lights at the market were still on, under the electric lamps the people milled, their faces and eyes still marked by sleep. Mr. Li saw a girl from his class buying bamboo shoots, the sight of him seemed to fill her eyes with terror, she ducked and vanished behind the market crates, Mr. Li thought her behavior patently absurd, what was so embarrassing about buying produce at the vegetable market? I'm just your teacher, don't I have to take my basket to market, too? To live, people have to eat, and to eat you have to get your groceries at the market.

I'll take a knuckle, Mr. Li said to the meat guy.

How about this one? The meat guy held up a big chunk of meat from the chopping board, it's about two kilos, I'll give you a discount.

That's too big, my wife only wants one kilo. Mr. Li looked at the clumps of meat, offal and bones on the board and said, we can't afford it, pork's pricier than human flesh these days.

Hard to find anything that's just one kilo. The meat guy's hands circled around the board until in the end he picked up a piece of meat and tossed it in the scale, I'll weigh this one up for you, it looks a bit fatty, but actually it's a meat knuckle.

From its shape, Mr. Li concluded that a meat

knuckle was some variant of the pork knuckle, and so he assented to the meat guy's choice. Then he bargained hard until he had knocked twenty cents off the price.

As Mr. Li was watering his potted cactus, he suddenly heard a loud shriek, you call this a knuckle, it's a hunk of fat. Mrs. Li's face hovered in desperation over the market basket, and then the piece of meat flew through the window, where it happened to land precisely on Mr. Li's foot.

It's a meat knuckle, and a meat knuckle is a knuckle. Mr. Li picked up the knuckle and said to Mrs. Li in his defense, it's not a rubber ball, you know, you shouldn't chuck it around like that.

You drive me crazy, you can't even tell a piece of fat from a knuckle, how come I've never heard of a meat knuckle, what the heck is that supposed to be? The meat guy lies through his teeth and you go ahead and believe it, you drive me crazy.

Mr. Li lifted up the meat and examined it carefully, and his sulky expression gradually grew helpless, finally he said downheartedly, I guess it does look like it's mostly fat, but it has some meat on it, we can make do.

Easy for you to say, Mrs. Li looked in disgust at Mr. Li and the meat in Mr. Li's hands, she raised her voice and went on, what did you pay? I bet he charged you the pork knuckle price, right?

I don't know, in any case I bargained, I made him knock twenty cents off. Mr. Li was stammering, trying to placate his wife with conciliatory words, even if it is fatty, you can make red braised pork out of it and it'll be pretty yummy, you know there's nothing I like better than your red braised pork. Mr. Li, meat in hand, was about to go inside and drop the meat in the sink. But Mrs. Li bolted over and blocked the doorway, her eyes shining with tears of wrath and rancor, this flustered and worried Mr. Li, usually these volatile reactions occurred only when he actually struck Mrs. Li.

What's the matter with you? Mr. Li held up the piece of meat and stood on the step, unable to go in and unwilling to retreat, he said, it's just a piece of meat, why get so worked up?

That's rich, coming from you! Tell me, how much do you make a month? We can barely feed ourselves on the peanuts you earn, so how come you're throwing six bucks away on the meat guy for no reason? Mrs. Li, dressed in cotton sweater and shorts, blanching with rage, blocked Mr. Li's way inside. Other grievances suddenly recalled themselves to her, and she couldn't prevent tears from trickling down, she said, an important thing like my little brother's wedding and you, his brother-in-law, you would only put up fifty bucks, yet now you throw six away on the meat guy for no reason at all, you really are trying to drive me crazy.

It's less than six. Mr. Li frowned, he didn't like it

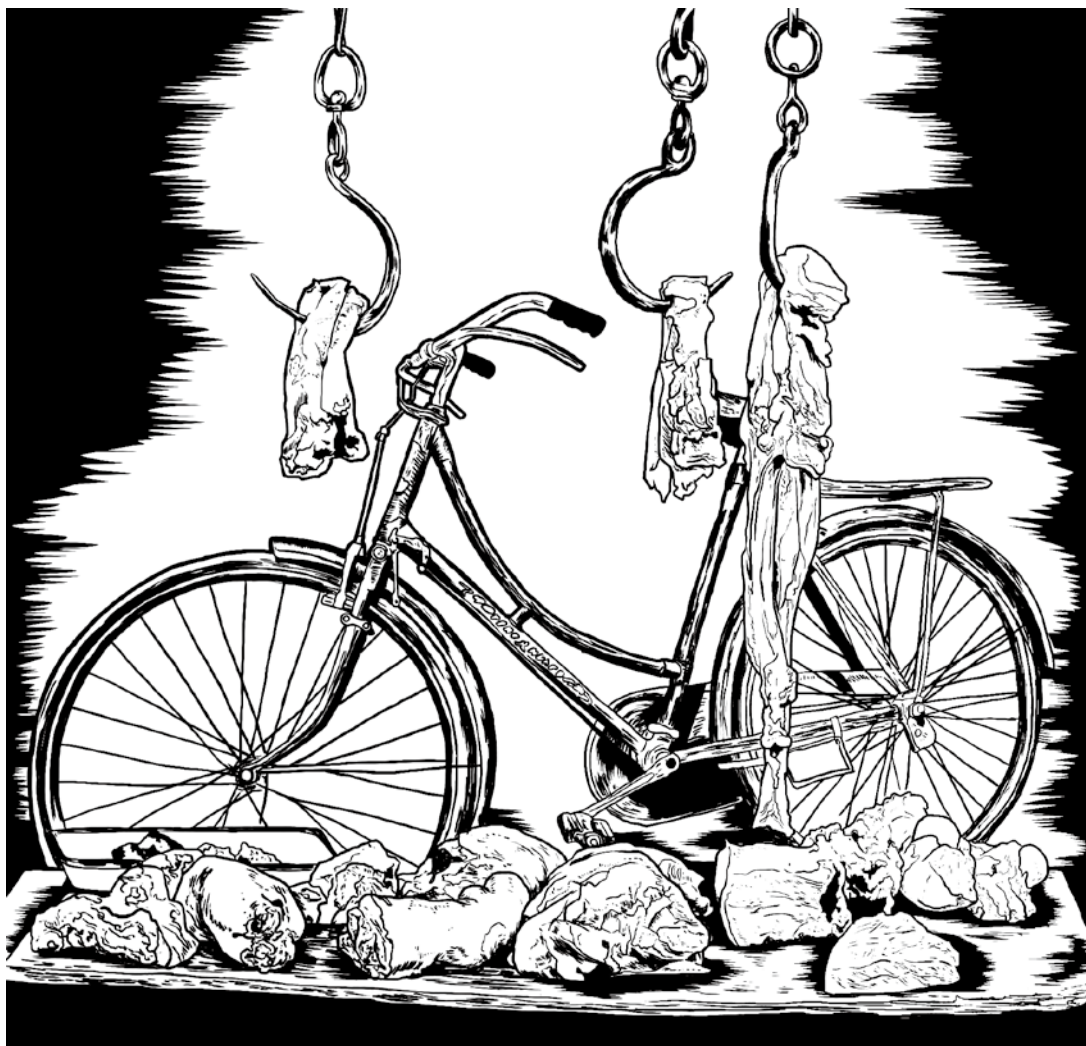


Illustration by Guo Xun

when Mrs. Li exaggerated, I paid six altogether, so how do you figure I threw six bucks away on him? This piece of fat is worth at least three in its own right. Mr. Li turned his face to look at the oleander, he paused for a moment, the meat guy made three bucks off us at most, so just let it go, we can just pretend it was a real knuckle, it all ends up in our stomachs anyway.

You're trying to drive me crazy, Mrs. Li raised her hand and swept back her disheveled hair, and with an

unfamiliar, severe look, she stared straight at Mr. Li, go back to the market and find the meat guy, take back this piece of fat, and bring the six bucks back.

I won't go. I don't want to go to the market twice in one day on account of three bucks. I'm trying to take care of you, otherwise I wouldn't have gone to the market in the first place, and I wouldn't have brought back this damned piece of meat.

So that's how you take care of me. Mrs. Li sneered contemptuously, then she snatched the meat out of

Mr. Li's hands, saying, if you won't go then I will, if you don't mind about the money, I do, if your health is too delicate to go twice to the market, I might as well resign myself to slaving my whole life for you, after all is there one day in the whole year when I don't go running off to the market? When we buy the cabbage in winter for pickling, some days I have to run to the market five times!

Mr. Li retreated into the courtyard, Mrs. Li in relentless pursuit, Mr. Li finally couldn't help striking her once again, to be precise it was more of a shove. Mrs. Li fell to the ground and burst instantly into miserable wails.

You hit me again, you throw money at the meat guy, and then you have the nerve to hit me, Mrs. Li said through her tears.

I didn't hit you, I just gave you a little push.

With my dizzy spells and my blurred vision, then you turn around and hit me, how do you expect me to go on living like this, Mrs. Li said, still crying.

Mr. Li suddenly recalled that his wife had been ailing over the past few days, and felt a pang of guilt. He looked down at the meat in his hand, furious but unable to vent his anger on it, he wished he could pitch this piece of meat, source of all discord, into Mahogany Road, though if he did doubtless it would only find its way into some neighbour's pot. Mr. Li clutched the meat in his hands, some frothy pink blood and slime

trickling through his fingers. He heard his wife's wails descend into low sobs, sobs that were interspersed with various complaints about her domestic hardship and misfortunes, Mr. Li sighed and said, don't cry, it's not worth getting all worked up about a piece of meat, I'll just go get the money back from the meat guy, alright?

Mr. Li was the guy who rode the old bike. The sun was already high in the heavens, and its rays gleamed on the stone paving of Mahogany Road with a piercing light. The air was suffused with coal smoke from the housewives' stoves, and on both sides the eaves of the houses teemed with bamboo poles on which laundry dried, so that passersby had to make their way through smoke and wet clothing. On his creaking bicycle, drops of water fell down upon him from above and landed on the tip of his nose, a weird, bone-chilling sensation. Turning at the corner, Mr. Li came across his colleague from the school, Mr. Zhu, who stepped off his bike and came towards him as though he had something to tell him. Mr. Li pretended he hadn't seen him, shielding the meat hanging from his handlebars with one hand and speeding up as he passed through the intersection. He heard Mr. Zhu calling behind him, hey, Li, where are you off to? Mr. Li pretended not to hear, Mr. Li certainly didn't want acquaintances to know his petty itinerary for the day, otherwise it would become the topic of idle gossip to-

morrow morning before class.

The market was beginning to break up, though the stench of rotten vegetable leaves and chicken shit was as strong as ever. Pushing his way through the crowds of people collapsing their produce crates, Mr. Li went inside. Lots of the vendors were already packing it in, and when Mr. Li got to the meat section it happened that the young meat guy was cleaning his chopping board, rubbing it fiercely down with a damp rag, bloody water and shreds of meat splashing all over the place.

Don't pack up yet, you cheated me. Mr. Li plonked the piece of meat on the chopping board, and, pointing at it, interrogated the meat guy, tell me, is this a pork knuckle or a piece of fat?

It's a piece of fat. Composed and unperturbed, the meat guy gave Mr. Li the once-over.

But just now you said it was knuckle of pork, and you sold it to me for the price of a knuckle. You actually charged me six bucks for a chunk of fat.

No way. Fat goes for one price, and knuckle for another, you think I'd have sold you the fat for the price of knuckle? The meat guy wrung the rag dry and walked over towards his flatbed three-wheeler, saying, I sell meat here every day, no one's ever accused me of a low trick like that, you must have remembered wrong, or else this is a deliberate scam.

I haven't remembered wrong, you're the one, al-

right. You even told me that it looked a little fatty but that it was actually a meat knuckle. Mr. Li had caught up with him and was standing in the way of the meat guy's three-wheeler, staring angrily at his youthful, ruddy face. He said, don't you try to sneak off, I'm asking you nicely to return my six bucks, I'm not going to let you just sneak off like that.

Sneak off? Now that I've sold all my meat, I'm going home to get some shuteye. The meat guy swept Mr. Li with a contemptuous glance, then straddled the seat of his three-wheeler and said, the poverty must be getting to you, trying to get fatty meat without wanting to pay for it, and then you want me to give you six bucks to boot? You can ask anyone here whether that makes sense anywhere in the world.

Already a few curious onlookers were making a circle, Mr. Li's anger made his face flush a deep red, these kinds of vulgar scenes filled him with dread, transformed his righteous anger into a kind of regret. He picked up the piece of meat from the block and mumbled, just my rotten luck, I'll make a complaint to the market's regulatory commission, a piece of fat for six bucks! Meat in hand, Mr. Li broke through the ring of onlookers, a suffocating feeling in his chest. He spat on the ground, like he was going to spit out all his grievance along with it. The old bike had been leaning against a flatbed cart, and after the cart had been moved, the bike had fallen on the ground. Mr.

Li picked his bike up, thinking that his luck couldn't get any worse. Then he discovered that the key to his homemade spring lock was missing, it wasn't in any of his pockets, Mr. Li's anxious mind filled with swear words, he was just bending over to see if he could smash the lock, when the key dropped out of his fist, the key had been in his hand the whole time.

Mr. Li mounted his bike, suddenly he saw the young meat guy go right past him on his three-wheeler, he was taking up all kinds of space, making a show of his arrogance, the sight of him getting away struck Mr. Li like a blow. It was in that moment that Mr. Li resolved not to yield an inch.

With an epic squeal, the old bike with the peeling paint got underway, Mr. Li riding parallel to the meat guy, casting composed sidelong looks at him, just as the hunter stares closely at the wily-though-gallant prey.

Why are you following me? If you have nothing better to do, go home and get back in bed, what's the use of staring at me?

You cheated me, you have to give me those six bucks back.

Stop harassing me, you want to follow me home? It won't do you any good, I get up early and go to bed late and all I have to show for it is a few bucks, why should I give you a present of six bucks? You get what you paid for, I never sell at a loss.

I'm not harassing you, I still have a big pile of homework I have to correct, you think I have time to harass you? But one has to be reasonable about things, and a family like mine can barely make ends meet, so how can I let you get away with scamming six bucks off me?

Six bucks, six bucks! The meat guy suddenly shouted impatiently, you think that meat didn't cost anything? Six bucks my foot, one buck at most.

Mr. Li felt a burst of joy, for now the meat guy had actually admitted his deception. Mr. Li pedaled hard for a second and, softening his tone, said, my mistake, it wasn't six, but it was more than one. Given its weight and price level, you need to give me back three, in that case I don't need to give you the meat back, I can take it home and make some nice red braised pork out of it.

Three? You think meat isn't meat just because it's fatty? Sometimes you can't even get fatty meat when you need it. The meat guy was slowing his three-wheeler down, and looked over to say to Mr. Li, I can give you back one and a half, at most, let's just say today must be my unlucky day.

Two bucks. Mr. Li said resolutely, after a moment's thought, you have to give me back at least two, because there's no way that meat was worth more than four.

Fine then, two, if you say so, I can't out-harass

you. The meat guy had finally lost his patience, with one hand he held the handlebar, and with the other he fished the money out of his large apron pocket, emerging with a big stack of greasy penny-notes, he couldn't be bothered to get off his three-wheeler, he just passed the bundle of penny-notes across the vehicle to Mr. Li, it must be my unlucky day, giving you two bucks for no good reason.

Mr. Li scrambled off his bicycle to take the money. Mr. Li left his bike at the intersection between Mahogany Road and Dragon's Gate Road while he stood behind the red traffic line and counted the penny-notes. Even while counting money, Mr. Li had not forgotten the traffic rules.

He counted twice and both times it came out one eighty, the meat guy still owed him twenty cents, the exact amount that Mr. Li had knocked off the price in the first place. Mr. Li again felt a heavy blow to the pit of his stomach, lifting his head he saw the meat guy's three-wheeler moving rapidly across the intersection, and the sight of the meat guy escaping again filled Mr. Li with a sense of ridicule and humiliation.

Come back here, you still owe me twenty cents!

Mr. Li held up the packet of penny-notes and shouted loudly, the meat guy didn't turn around, maybe he heard and maybe he didn't, you have to know that it's a noisy, busy intersection, and the sound of the vehicles in traffic swallowed up Mr. Li's hoarse voice.

All of a sudden, Mr. Li lost his temper, he swore coarsely, rudely, then he rapidly got on his bike and rode off after the meat guy, he had decided to have it out with this treacherous and repulsive jerk. Without a thought for anything else, Mr. Li sped through the intersection, it was a moment of ineluctable disaster, a frozen fish truck was crossing, and just as the driver hit the brakes he heard a wild cry, followed by the crisp, dreadful sound of the bicycle being run over.

This was an early morning in late spring, and what's more it was a Sunday. The sunlight shone lazily on the site of the traffic accident. The people of Mahogany Road came to the intersection to gaze at the crimson pool of blood, next to the blood a familiar old wreck of a bike lay on the ground, now smashed entirely to pieces, while a hunk of fatty meat hung from the handlebars of the bike, wholly unscathed. In the sunshine at nine o'clock in the morning, that hunk of meat glimmered dimly with a pale grey radiance.

Translated by Josh Stenberg



藍藍

Lan Lan

Lan Lan is considered one of the most influential Chinese lyrical poets of the present time. She is the bestselling author of nine poetry titles including *Life with a Smile*, *Songs of Romance*, *Inner Life*, *Dream*, *Dream* and *From Here, To Here*. Also a prolific prose and children's fiction writer, she has been translated into ten languages. Awarded the prestigious Liu Li'an Poetry Prize in 1996, she has also received four of China's highest literary honors, including the Poetry & People Award and the Yulong Poetry Prize. A regular guest at international poetry festivals, she lives in Beijing.

The Death of Sappho

...So, here is the legend.

A handsome young fisherman still stands
on immortal waves. But could someone else say
it didn't come from a proofreader's pen: Adonis's blue eyes
burn with unquenchable flames, and
the city and her letters are dressed in perfume?

There must be a third Lesbos
on the tall tower of a wide-leafed arbor
and below the buses spit out smoke
driving straight into life's violent storms.

A masterful musical performer,
she doesn't mind being thrown into a blaze of poetry
this pride holds its head high after two thousand years—
“One who died following intricate song's lost measure”
was the epitaph written by the poet H.D.,
and what would she say to that?

—It's over. She's already far from the clamor,
heading onto the balcony—it's still the highest cliff on Lukas
and the distant faun is there before her eyes:

She flies down,
and lets go of the harp still humming in her hands.

Gobi Serenade

Your song holds the dream I am destined
to lose, like a kiss that makes lips shut tight
weeping over the past
quietly rises as you slowly go by

There must be a greater loneliness, since there are stars.
Gazing into the distance, when you say the word
“sorrow,” a faint light
glistens on the dew.

In the first light of morning, the dawn weaves
my dark years into a field lined
with poetry, the donkey and rooster wake
and make a new morning for someone.

There must be a more suffering love, since plants
will grow in the desiccated desert.
The wind from the mountains blows open my eyes,
then having run across the earth all day,
it quiets again. Oh, night suddenly rings with song,

and you’re almost the cause of a car crash. In all my dead days
you’re almost a reminder of happiness.

Let Me Make Peace with an Ordinary Life

Let me make peace with an ordinary life
make peace with and cherish its filthy streets
its daily boredoms and fights
let me discover when I bend down
a few tufts of grass by the wall
let me perceive the beauty of sighs

Life is just life
just as the sweet apple was once black manure
living, crying, loving
are like this—
a body bending far down.

Entrusting

Now, I want to mention the white poplar
outside the window—roof beams of the northern sky

I want to mention the stars deep in the wheat fields
shepherd's-purse flowers spinning in another Milky Way

that the happy life of clothing being washed at dusk
is a pledge that pebbles will build up the riverbanks

do you remember—our hometown's earthen walls
the undulation of the moon and plants

...meditation of elms. Locust flowers' drifting perfume.
I am the wind. I am an owl
perched in a tree thirty years ago—

you'll see how I very slowly
bury myself

That Autumn

My love, the crook of that autumn's arm
might be where all autumns go
I watched you sprout like spinach
from the earth before me
gathering beans, the moonlit night
or you sat on a ridge between fields
the grass was fragrant and soft
a few thin clouds crossed the sky, the poplars overhead
rustled out the last grieved song of old leaves
What is forgotten? Time
or yourself?

Let me think for a while, my heart
a shiny black cricket, the solitary wind
I heard you say:
to be good enough for them...
you shyly turned to gaze up at the trees
where a nest was hidden
the god of bells was hidden in your eyes
I suddenly froze—
like someone whose death will come in autumn

Perhaps

Perhaps, we should plant a row of beans on the uncultivated earth, and a few apple trees
and set them alight with tanned hands;

you should break your teeth with a mouthful of grit
and then you will know the throat that gives birth to song;

pray for this kind of glory—
that the things that torture you will speak for you.

And so, you can continue to dig deep into the earth
in a country cobbled with deceit.

Yellow River Village Ruins

Another Yellow River village
a crow crouches patiently in the crown of a poplar tree
flocks of sparrows fly over drying grain
their wings stippled with golden awn
they recognize me.

This breeze blew here years ago
no separation between the ages
could I be just another one?

At dusk, the long shadow of trees fling themselves at sand dunes
and it's time to relight the cooking fires
familiar villagers hoist spades on their shoulders
and walk the ridges between fields
oxen bear heavy bundles of grass
like in older eras. I keep out of their way

No separation between the ages
there is only the Yellow River village, this unmoving
surging river

Practice

A soon as certain things are said
they turn to lies.
I don't know what to do, as though paralyzed
by a curse. To express it... I won't pick
funereal words.
Or cover-ups, or darkness...
or a loss of trust in objects
caused by ignorance

The best measure still comes from listening
to the racket of sparrows at dawn, dogs barking
the drip of snow melting in gutters...
the reeds at Crane City

Who hides between the delicate reeds
listening to the wind brush through the leaves
who with the lightest touch
lifts me up, toward himself
in case autumn is approaching

in case someone asks me my background
I watch autumn living on a single reed
summoning me
into oblivion or submersion
the catkins are like heavy snow
covering the marshes flake by flake
I watch a gray crane like a paper bird
 flit sideways over a dune
and disappear into the distant silence

Maybe this is how I should answer
the interrogation of darkness
I bear too heavy a burden and owe too much—
the catkins lift and fly one by one:
heartbroken
and tiny.
Wild sunflowers—

in autumn the wild sunflowers
are beheaded.
The people who pass by her will suddenly
return. Dusk arrives,
and her face, like the setting sun, becomes
golden dust,
as does the interminable summer.

Who cuts across it? Cuts across the buckwheat horizon?
Whose place must I take in death again,
for all those old sorrows?

Unreal wild sunflowers. Unreal
song.
The poisonous sting of the autumn wind at my chest.

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

Book Expo America 2015

Chinese Writers: An Introduction

Every year, at the Book Expo America publishing event held in New York, one country is chosen to be the Global Market Forum Guest of Honor. After two years of planning, the China Guest of Honor program will be held this May, 2015, more than twenty Chinese writers will visit New York as part of the program, and take part in literary events. This issue of *Pathlight* is dedicated to those authors and poets: we've chosen short stories and poems from some, and translated interviews with others; in the back of the issue are introductory bios for all the other writers attending. We hope these pages will provide a useful guide to New York event-goers, but also interesting reading for anyone who wants to know more about the writers representing China abroad.



Bi Feiyu

A two-time recipient of China's prestigious Lu Xun Prize for Literature, Bi Feiyu is as popular with critics as he is with readers. The author of novels including *The Moon Opera*, *Three Sisters*, and *Massage* (all three available in English), Bi's narratives are known for their emotional depth and clarity, and their sympathetic treatment of more vulnerable characters. Bi was co-author of the script for Zhang Yimou's *Shanghai Triad*, and the film made from *Massage*, directed by Lou Ye, was a hit at the Berlin International Film Festival.



He Jianming

He Jianming, a well-known author of reportage literature*, has been awarded the Lu Xun Literature Prize three times, the National Excellent Reportage Prize seven times, and the Xu Chi Reportage Prize four times. His main works include *The Country*, *Fidelity and Betrayal*, *Fundamental Interests*, and *Falling Tears Are Gold*. He is additionally the author of the film scripts *Westbound Convict Train* and *Folksong Xintianyou*, and the TV series *Founders* and *National Action*. He has published over 50 works of literature, including over 30 works of literary reportage, which have been translated into dozens of languages. He is vice president of the China Writers' Association.

* "reportage literature" (*baogao wenxue*) is a form of creative non-fiction combining investigative journalism and creative prose.



Ji Hongjian

As a young author of reportage literature, Ji Hongjian serves as deputy director of the Young Writers Committee of the China Reportage Association. Since the early 90s he has published many works of long-form reportage, including “Chinese Imperial Guards” and “Interviews with Infertile Patients,” as well as shorter ones like “A Dumb Soldier in the Red Army,” “In Search of Longmen Mountain,” and “Memories of the People.” He has won the Art and Literature Prize of the PLA Academy, the Hunan Literary Prize for Youth, the Ordos Literature Prize for Chinese Writers and the “Hope Cup” Rookie Award for Chinese Literature.



Lü Xin

Lü Xin, born in 1963 in Shanxi Province, began publishing fiction in 1986. During the late 1980s and early 1990s he mostly wrote short stories, and began to author novellas and novels in the mid-1990s. His works include the short story collection *The White Horse in the Mountain*, the novella collections *The Order of the Night*, *Sunflower*, and *The Spring of Aspens*, and the novels *The Touch*, *The Light*, *Plum Rain*, *Green Grass*, *Becoming the Past*, *Mr Ruan Returns* and *Hide My Face*. After many years as a literary editor, Lü is now a professional writer in the Shanxi Provincial Writers Association.



Mei Zihan

Mei Zihan is an author of children's literature, and a professor and Ph.D. Supervisor of Shanghai Normal University. He is one of the pioneers of children's book reading activities in China, as well as a member of the China Writers Association. His best-known works include *Daughter's Story* and *Dai Xiaoqiao and His Buddies*, as well as the picture book series *Stories of Lilaer*.



Qin Wenjun

Qin Wenjun is one of China's most iconic authors of contemporary children's literature. While drawing on deep Chinese traditions, she has also laid new foundations for young readers. Her best-known works include *The Complete Story of Jia Li*, *The Mind of a Girl*, *3 Tian Tang Street*, *Taotao Series*, and *Girl at Sixteen*. In 1996, she won a Special Award of the Premio Letterario Internazionale Mondello. In 2002, she was nominated for the Hans Christian Andersen Award. Her translated books in English include, *3 Tian Tang Street*, *Curly the Black Goat*, *Hoopy the White Goat*, and *Smiling Kalakela*, published by Long River Press.



Shao Li

Shao Li, the author of novels, essays and poetry, was honored as “Young Writer with the Most Potential” in the 2003 Chinese Literature Figure campaign, which collated votes from hundreds of media outlets nationwide. Her best-known works are the short story “Notes Taken When Serving Temporary Positions,” the novel *My Life Quality*, and such novellas as *The Life Quality Problems of Wang Yuejin*, *The Case of Liu Wanfu*, *Autumn Outside the City*, *The Fortieth Circle*, and *Minghui’s Christmas*. She has won numerous literary awards.



Shen Dongzi

Shen Dongzi began his career in the foreign literature editorial department of the Lijiang Publishing House in 1987, and by 1997 had become a professional novelist on contract with the Guangxi Literature Academy. Shen is now vice president of the Guilin Municipal Writers Association, and director of the reviewing office of Lijiang Publishing House. His principle works include the novel *Tao Young to Know All*, the short story collection *The Heart-Emptied*, and the essay collections *The Guiliners* and *A Lonely Horse in the West Wind*. In addition, he is the translator of *Wuthering Heights*, *Dubliners*, and *Selected Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*.



Sheng Keyi

Sheng Keyi lived for a time in Shenzhou, Guangdong province, and her novel *Northern Girls*, published in English by Penguin, reflects her experience as a migrant worker there. Now living in Beijing, Sheng is one of the newer generations of writers who deal primarily with modern China (as opposed to rural themes), but displays none of the immaturity or naiveté that often plagues China's younger writers. She tends to begin with female characters and themes, but is a ferocious experimenter with style and voice, and her works cover a wide range of emotional and social territory.



Su Kui

Known primarily as an essayist and columnist, Su Kui is an avid observer of life, producing non-fiction works with a strong literary flavor that explore the world through some of her own personal interests: reading, film, and travel. In six collections of essays including *The Coffee Is Cold*, and the most recent *Another Day, Another Place*, her cool sensitivity and clear expression have won her accolades such as the Taishan Literary Prize, and the Sun Li Essay Prize. She has been equally successful as a journalist, garnering more than 50 awards and recognitions for her columns.



Wang Xufeng

Professor Wang Xufeng is an author, librettist, and authority on the traditions of Chinese tea. She has combined her interests with great success: the three-part *Teaman Trilogy*, a fictional saga centered around tea, won the Mao Dun Literature Prize and was made into a TV series – it has also been translated into Russian. In addition to her fiction and scholarship, Wang has worked to merge traditional Chinese literature and opera, producing, among other works, a Kunqu version of the classical novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*.



Wu Meizhen

Wu Meizhen, one of the most famous children's authors in China, has published over one hundred children's books in the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Her best-known works include *Little Reading Room of Sister Sunshine*, and the *Red Eyes of My Deskmate* series. Her works have won the Dandelion Children Literature Award from the Ministry of Culture, as well as the National Children Book Award from the State Administration of Publication.



Xu Zechen

Xu's fiction is focused primarily on China's less-fortunate social classes – peddlers of pirated DVDs, migrant workers – and his spare, realist style lends a wry humor to their struggles. His three novels and many short stories have won several prizes within China for new and promising writers, and he is generally considered one of the burgeoning new stars of China's literary scene. His newest novel, *Jerusalem*, is a more ambitious exploration of the Chinese generation currently in their 30s, told through the stories of four characters who shared a common childhood.

Recommended Books



01

Yellow Earth

Liu Qingbang, Beijing October Arts and Literature Publishing House, November 2014

The villagers of Fanghuying are unhappy when their Party secretary Fang Shouben is relieved of his position and replaced by his corrupt son, Fang Guangmin. Fang Shouxian manages to persuade Fang Guochun, a teacher in the county town, to make an official complaint. But when he eventually succeeds in getting rid of Guangmin, Guochun discovers that his replacement is going to be Shouxian's son. The corruption gets even worse, and - when the feud leads to his family being subjected to abuse - Guochun takes his complaints higher up the ladder, with calamitous consequences.

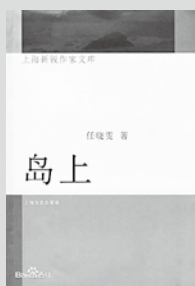


02

Above Living

Yan Zhen, Hunan Arts and Literature Publishing House, December 2014

This novel focuses on the struggles of its first-person narrator Nie Zhiyuan, a history doctorate student who finds his lofty ideals in conflict with the reality of society. He is determined to broaden the confines of academia, but his accomplishments do not help him deal with the toadying career opportunists who surround him. Nie Zhiyuan strives to do what is right, but he does not make things any easier for himself. Yan Zhen unveils the unspoken arrangements and corruption that have riddled academia and brought the intelligentsia of China into disrepute.



03

On the Island

Ren Xiaowen, Shanghai Arts and Literature Publishing House, January 2015

Fang Qinmin - a so-called madwoman - has been placed in isolation on a desolate and inaccessible island. There she encounters other sufferers of various different mental disorders, who are in constant conflict with one another. By the time she has grown accustomed to life on the island, a Battle Royale scenario is already beginning to unfold. Constantly on the run, she ends up stumbling across the terrifying secret of the island - a secret which dovetails with her own gradually returning memories to produce a shocking truth.



04

A History of Violence

Shouzhi, The Writers Publishing House, March 2015

This collection from young writer Shouzhi contains seventeen stories, including the widely acclaimed "Searching for the New", "Why Do We Not Have Wives", "Shouting As One", and "What Shall We Do". His uniquely written tales focus on the lives of ordinary people in second-tier cities and towns, with a narrative style that is controlled and detached - never indulging in sentimentality, but imbuing the trifling details of these lives with the penetrative power of a fable.

People's Literature magazine's Recommended Books of 2015



05

Liu Xiaodong

Yi Zhou, The Writers Publishing House, May 2014

This volume comprises three novellas - "Depth," "Night is Here," and "The End of All Roads" - all of which have a narrator named Liu Xiaodong. Though all three are middle-aged intellectuals, each version of Liu Xiaodong is a distinct character. Yi Zhou explores the moral crisis which the new generation of intelligentsia is undergoing, and in the process reflects the intricacies of modern life. No matter who "Liu Xiaodong" might actually be, he represents both observer and participant in contemporary China's spiritual malaise.



06

After Baptism

Yang Jiang, People's Literature Publishing House, August 2014

Now over a hundred years in age, Yang Jiang has written a sequel to her novel Baptism. In this book the pure hearted couple from Baptism finally find their happy ending. Du Lili, the wife of Xu Yancheng, is condemned as a rightist and sentenced to work in the countryside. Once there she develops feelings for Ye Dan, who shares her plight. On returning to Beijing she decides to break up with Xu Yancheng, and - extricated from all ties - each of them is free to pursue a relationship that will bring them true fulfillment.



07

A Distant Man

Xue Shu, Shanghai Cultural Publishing House, March 2015

Xue Shu wrote this longform work of non-fiction after two years in which his father suffered from Alzheimer's. It traces the stages of the disease, from initial lapses in memory to complete loss of self-awareness, providing a record of how he went from perfect health to a state in which he could no longer recognise any of his relatives or remember his past. This book shows what life is like for an aging population, and assesses the relationship between children and parents in a society with rapidly changing values.



08

Celestial Bodies Suspended

Tian Er, The Writers Publishing House, August 2015

The slick and quick-witted Fu Qingming earns the approval of his superiors and does well; Ding Yiteng, on the other hand, is steady, prudent, and goes by the rules. Working together at a local police station, the two become inseparable friends despite their differences. Yet when the time comes to move on, they go in very different directions: Fu opens his own gambling den, becomes a loan shark, and is soon a big name in the criminal underworld, while Ding becomes a lawyer. But a baffling case involving the murder of a prostitute will soon bring them together again...

Translators



Eric Abrahamsen

Eric Abrahamsen is a translator and publishing consultant who has been living in China since 2001. He is a co-founder and manager of Paper Republic, and the recipient of translation grants from PEN and the National Endowment for the Arts. His translation of Xu Zechen's Running Through Beijing was published by Two Lines Press in early 2014.



Joshua Dyer

Joshua Dyer is a Beijing-based freelance translator and contributing editor at Pathlight. His previous translations have appeared in Taiwan Literature English Translation Series, St. Petersburg Review, LEAP: The International Art Magazine of Contemporary China, and Pathlight. He holds an MA in East Asian Studies from the University of California Santa Barbara.



Eleanor Goodman

Eleanor Goodman is a writer and a translator of Chinese literature. She is a Research Associate at the Fairbank Center at Harvard University, and spent a year at Peking University on a Fulbright Fellowship. She has been an artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome and was awarded a Henry Luce Translation Fellowship from the Vermont Studio Center. Her book of translations, Something Crosses My Mind: Selected Poems of Wang Xiaoni (Zephyr Press, 2014) was the recipient of a 2013 PEN/Heim Translation Grant. Her first book of poems, Nine Dragon Island, will be published this year.



Brendan O'Kane

Brendan O'Kane is a co-founder of Paper Republic and the translator of a forthcoming collection of fiction by Diao Dou from Comma Press. After serving a lengthy stretch in Beijing, he is currently working on a PhD in premodern Chinese literature at the University of Pennsylvania.



Lucas Klein

Lucas Klein, a former radio DJ and union organizer, is a writer, translator, and editor of [CipherJournal.com](http://cipherjournal.com). His translations, essays, and poems have appeared at Two Lines, Jacket, and Drunken Boat. A graduate of Middlebury College (BA) and Yale University (Ph.D), he is Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Chinese, Translation & Linguistics at City University of Hong Kong. His translations of Xi Chuan is published by New Directions. He is also at work translating Tang dynasty poet Li Shangyin.



Ken Liu

Ken Liu (<http://kenliu.name>) is an author and translator of speculative fiction, as well as a lawyer and programmer. A winner of the Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Awards, his original fiction has been published in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Asimov's, Analog, Clarkesworld, Lightspeed, and Strange Horizons, among other places. He has translated the works of many leading Chinese speculative fiction authors such as Liu Cixin (The Three-Body Problem), Chen Qiufan ("The Endless Farewell"), Xia Jia ("Heat Island"), Ma Boyong ("City of Silence"), Bao Shu ("What's Past Shall In Kinder Light Appear") for English markets. In 2012, he won the World Science Fiction and Fantasy Translation Award for Chen Qiufan's "The Fish of Lijiang." He lives with his family near Boston, Massachusetts.



Canaan Morse

Canaan Morse was one of the founding editors of Pathlight: New Chinese Writing. He is a literary translator and editor with an M.A. in Classical Chinese Literature from Peking University. His work has appeared in The Kenyon Review, Chinese Literature Today, Cha: An Asian Literary Journal, Words and the World, and elsewhere. His translation of Ge Fei's novella The Invisibility Cloak, which won the Susan Sontag Prize for Translation, is due for publication in 2015 by New York Review of Books, as part of the NYRB Classics Series. He lives in Maine.



Karmia Olutade

Karmia Olutade is a Chinese Canadian writer and translator who recently finished her degree in English literature and creative writing with an emphasis in poetry at Stanford University, where she began her dramatic writing career. Her original musicals and plays include Forgetting Tiburon, Nightmouth, Pawn ("Best Original Musical Award" at the 2011 Daegu Int'l Musical Festival; NY Int'l Fringe Festival), Tsangyang Gyatso and a young adult piece, Foundling Hill. Her bilingual poetry collection Ere (Foreign Languages Press) was published in 2007 and her English translation of Wang Wengin's poetry collection Good Now (Yunnan Publishing House), was published in 2013. She currently writes and teaches in Beijing.



Josh Stenberg

Josh Stenberg is an Asia-based Canadian writer and translator. His fiction and poetry have appeared in or are forthcoming in Asia Literary Review, Vancouver Review, FreeFall, Kartika Review, Assaracus, Antigonish Review and in several other journals or collections in Canada, Brazil, Poland, China, USA and Indonesia. His translations of Chinese fiction have appeared in The Kyoto Journal and Renditions, and have been collected in two volumes of Su Tong's shorter fiction, Madwoman on the Bridge and Other Stories (2008) and Tattoo: Three Novellas (2010). His most recent publication is as editor of Irina's Hat: New Short Stories from China (2013). Academically, he has written on Chinese migrant communities as well as contemporary fiction and stage, and is pursuing a Ph.D. in Chinese theatre at Nanjing University.



Hallie Treadway

Hallie Treadway is a 2010 graduate of Dartmouth College, where she majored in Chinese and English Literature. Her interest in translation was kindled in high school by the differences between literal, literary, and singable translations of French art songs and Schubert Lieder. This interest grew during college, in no small part due to Prof. Monika Otter's formidable course "Translation: Theory and Practice." After graduation, Hallie focused on building her understanding of China and Chinese. She spent two years as a Teaching Fellow with Teach for China, studied Chinese for a year at the Inter-University Program for Chinese Language Studies (IUP), and has been employed in the education industry since.



Helen Wang

Helen Wang was born in Yorkshire, UK. She has degrees in Chinese (BA, SOAS) and Archaeology (PhD, UCL), and is currently Curator of East Asian Money at the British Museum. She's a London-based contributor to Paper-Republic.org and co-tweets with translator Nicky Harman on @cfbcuk (China Fiction Book Club UK).



Austin Woerner

Austin Woerner is the translator of Doubled Shadows: Selected Poetry of Ouyang Jianghe (Zephyr, 2012), Phoenix by Ouyang Jianghe (Zephyr, 2014), and a novel, The Invisible Valley (still unpublished) by Su Wei. Formerly the English Editor for the Chinese literary magazine Chutzpah!, Woerner has a BA in East Asian Studies from Yale and an MFA in creative writing from the New School.

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