



Classics of Modern Chinese Literature

A Feng Zikai Reader

Translated by Liu Jun and Erik Nilsson

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Introduction

Feng Zikai (1898-1975) was a renowned painter, writer, educator and translator who left behind more than 180 books. He was one of the initiators of the country's New Cultural Movement in the 1920s, introducing Western art theory, classic painting and music to the public.

Born in Chongde County, Zhejiang Province, as the only boy of a big family, he first attended a traditional private school, then entered the provincial normal middle school in 1914, where he met two important teachers: Li Shutong (1880-1942) and Xia Mianzun (1886-1946). Both were highly accomplished in multiple fields. Li's achievements in Buddhism (he was ordained in 1918, and became known as Master Hongyi) had a life-long influence on Feng's works. As is shown in several works selected here, Feng shows compassion for all forms of life.

In 1921, Feng went to Tokyo to study art and music for a year, then returned to Zhejiang as a teacher. It was in this period that his famous illustrations were first published. Besides depicting ancient poetry and children's



life, he also captured the sufferings of the people.

When the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1937-45) broke out, he led his family on an arduous journey toward Southwest China, where he taught at several universities and continued writing.

After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, Feng stayed in Shanghai and chaired the city's Chinese Painting Academy and the Artists' Association, besides being vice chair of the Writers' Association. He translated important classics like *The Tale of Genji* from Japan and *Notes of a Hunter* by Russian writer Ivan Turgenev. He suffered much during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) but persisted with translation and writing. He passed away on September 15, 1975.

Translators

Liu Jun, Erik Nilsson

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Happy New Year

Early in the morning of Dec 31, I woke up to my younger brother's clamor. He was in the next room, jumping and yelling. "Only one page left on the calendar! The New Year's coming! Everyone get up, let's celebrate the New Year!" Then came the sound of Muma^① stopping him. "Rujin!^② Quiet! You've woken up Papa! You are already a senior student, half a year into the fifth grade. How can you still be so childish, jumping and yelling so early in the morning?" Brother fell silent, then asked Muma for the new calendar in a lowered voice. I hurriedly draped my coat over my shoulders and got up, thinking this would be the last time I got up this year and tomorrow would begin New Year's vacation. The thought of this emboldened me in the cold and I got dressed faster. But then what

① Instead of the commonly used "Mama", the author used the word "Muma", a fond calling of one's mother in the author's hometown in Zhejiang Province. However, the term for father was "Baba", a rather modern choice.

② In Chinese, Rujin means "like gold". Many names in this book are poetic and carry special meaning.

Muma said to Brother reminded me how I have also finished half of the sixth grade, and I will graduate in another half a year. I wondered if I could... I was a bit worried.

Buttoning my clothes, I walked into Muma's room. The calendar did have only one thin piece of paper hanging there, looking rather pitiful. By the window, Brother was toying with a new calendar. I walked closer and saw the thick bundle was wrapped in a piece of red paper and attached to a hard paperboard. Written on top of the board was the name of a cigarette company. Beneath the brand name was a drawing. At the center of the drawing was a rectangle, inside of which was printed a movie star's photo. Whether it was Hu Die or Xu Lai,^③ I didn't know. She turned her head half way around, waist twisted, hands posed in a gesture, lips pursed in a faint hint of smile, eyeing me askance. She looked just like the naughty Jin Cui'e from our school, making a face behind the teacher's back. I whirled around to walk downstairs and wash my face. After eating porridge for

③ Hu Die (1908-89) was a well-known movie actress in China in the 1930s. She starred in the country's first movie with soundtrack titled *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony* (*Ge Nv Hongmudan*, 1931) directed by Zhang Shichuan. Xu Lai (1909-73) gained overnight stardom in *Late Spring* (*Canchun*, 1933) by the same director.

breakfast, as we set out for school, Brother kept on reminding Muma to keep the last calendar page for him to tear off, and the new calendar for him to open. Muma agreed, smiling.

We finished the year's last day of lessons and headed home happily. Brother tossed his schoolbag and rushed upstairs, ready to tear off the last calendar page. But he was stopped by Papa. Papa was sitting by the window-side table reading an album. A bowl of daffodils, a bottle of nandina domestica, a pair of red candles, a copper censer and a small chime clock rested on the table. I must have seen this before, but couldn't remember when. Upon second thought, I remembered that I had seen it on the same day last year! Many other memories began to surface as I looked at the ritualistic objects.

"Today is the last day of this year, we should not spend it hastily," Papa told Brother. "Let's hold a vigil for the New Year^④ and don't go to bed until midnight. The calendar must wait until then to be torn off. At night, we'll also play games, tell

④ *Shousui* is an old custom in China, when people sit up until midnight to welcome the first day of the lunar New Year during the long Spring Festival, which usually comes in February. In the 1930s, "modern" Chinese who had been in touch with Western culture were beginning to celebrate festivals on the Western calendar, yet still in traditional ways, such as eating *niangao*, or rice cake for the New Year.

stories and cook the New Year rice cake!" Hearing this, Brother started jumping and yelling again. Papa caught hold of his elbow. "No hurry," he said. "There's still eight hours left this year. You can take this occasion to draw a New Year's card and send wishes to your best friends."

"Okay, great!" We both agreed and raced downstairs to fetch the painting tools from our schoolbags. On the way, I remembered that last year, when Teacher Hua asked us to draw a New Year's card during our art lesson, I drew a pig. My classmates all uttered "ugly", "ugly". But Teacher Hua said it was "beautiful". "Why do you look down upon the pig? Don't you all love eating pork?" he asked. When I related this to Papa, he said, "Chinese painters never drew pigs, thus people are not used to it. Actually it's not a big deal. It's just not as delicate in appearance as the rabbit or goat." What animal should be painted this year?^⑤ I'll ask Papa in a while.

We carried the painting tools upstairs, put them on the table by the eastern window and began

^⑤ There are 12 symbolic animals corresponding with the 12 *dizhi* (earthly branches) in the lunar calendar: *zi*-mouse, *chou*-ox, *yin*-tiger, *mou*-rabbit, *chen*-dragon, *si*-snake, *wu*-horse, *wei*-goat, *shen*-monkey, *you*-rooster, *xu*-dog and *hai*-pig. Matched with the ten *tiangan* (heavenly stems: *jia*, *yi*, *bing*, *ding*, *wu*, *ji*, *geng*, *xin*, *ren*, *kui*), they form a 60-year cycle.

drawing the cards. What to draw? I asked Papa what year would arrive. Papa said the coming year would be *bing-zi*, and a mouse should be drawn for the year of *zi*. But the subject I discovered was grabbed by Brother. He said, "I'll draw the mouse, a mouse dragging a cart! I saw this in the *Kingdom of the Small People* yesterday."^④ I tried to reason with him, but he babbled on "*duiqi, duiqi, duiqi, duiqi*", while picking up a pencil to draw the outline. "*Duiqi*" was his way of saying "*duibuqi*" (sorry), a new pet phrase he has found recently. Whenever he knows something is unsuitable but finds it hard to give up, he would say this. I knew he was immersed in the mouse cart, so I waived. But what should I draw? I thought for a long while, then remembered a pattern of flowers Teacher Hua once taught us. I had a good time drawing the flowers, so I decided to draw some flowers.

Before I had finished coloring, Brother was done with his work and took it to Papa. I quickly finished the painting and brought it over. I found Papa trimming Brother's drawing with a pair of scissors.

④ The writer seems to refer to Lilliput in *Gulliver's Travels*. But what the boy did draw is more suited for the pumpkin-chariot saddled with mice-turned horses in the tale of Cinderella.

“When you draw the mouse cart, don’t draw it too high,” he said. “Cut away part of the bottom and leave some empty space on the top to write.” Trimming the piece into a postcard shape, he added, “It’s rather vacant up here, just add a very long whip.” “There was a whip, but I forgot!” Brother replied hastily. Papa scratched a curving line on the card with his fingers, then asked him to imitate the outline. Papa looked at my painting and said, “Very pretty. But you can outline the petals in a deeper red, and the leaves with a darker green. Crimson with pink, dark green with emerald, that will be much prettier. This is called ‘harmony of analogous colors’.” I made the changes as he said. Brother had finished the whip. Seeing my drawing, he jumped up, saying, “Sister uses pigments! No way, no way. I’ll do it again!” He clamored, demanding to Papa that he should draw another one. Papa said, “Rujin! Painting doesn’t have to use pigment! Your sister is drawing a ‘decorative picture’, so she uses pigments. You are drawing ‘an event’, so you do not need to use pigment.” But Brother was dissatisfied. He pouted his small lips and looked at my painting, grumbling, “I’ll do it again, I’ll do it again!” Muma

entered the room. Hearing Brother's grumbling, she came to look at his painting. She knew he was unhappy about the lack of color and told him, "You can use pigment here. Let me show you. The little man's coat can be red, the wheels of the small cart go yellow, the mouse and the cart are black." Brother followed Muma's advice, found the result satisfactory, and grinned. Papa walked over, a cigarette between his lips. He looked at the updated work and said, smiling, "Good, very good. Thanks to Muma, you won't make a fuss again. But I think the color red is rather lonesome there, without an 'echo'. It's better to change the rope pulling the cart into red." Brother cut in again, "It's a red string! I've seen it in the *Kingdom of the Small People*." A discussion on how to change the painting followed. Muma told me, "Fengchun,^⑦ help him. Erase the black rope lightly, then cover it with red pigment mixed with white." I did the changes under Muma's instructions. Seeing my success, Brother began again, "Duiqi, duiqi, duiqi, duiqi." Muma said, "Stop saying 'duiqi'. Let's find out to whom you want to send these two cards." Brother and I answered

⑦ Fengchun means "upon spring".

at the same time, “For Brother Yexin of the Qiu family.”^⑧ “Good,” Papa said, then taught us how to write on the cards. Muma said, “When you are done with the writing, come downstairs for supper. After supper we’ll hold the vigil. Last week Yexin said he would join us to hold the vigil at the New Year’s vacation. He might arrive at dusk.” Saying that, she walked downstairs first.

Brother was the last to arrive at supper. He held a letter with a one *fen*^⑨ stamp on the envelop, which carried the words “To Mr. Qiu Yexin at No. 8, Meihuanong,^⑩ this town” and “From Liu Residence,^⑪ No. 2, Meihuanong”. He hurriedly told us, “I’ll send these two cards at the post office before coming back for dinner.” At that, he dashed away. Papa said, laughing, “Haha! The Qiu family is closer than the post office!” Muma added, “Before the letters make it to the post office, the receiver may already be here!”

After supper, we were lighting the red candles

⑧ Qiu Yexin means “heart of leaf in autumn”.

⑨ *Fen* is the smallest amount in the Chinese currency system. 1 yuan = 10 *jiao* = 100 *fen*. In the 1930s, the Kuomintang government carried out reforms in the currency system, but many kinds of currencies were still in circulation.

⑩ *Meihua* means *mei* blossom, an elegant flower loved for centuries by learned scholars. *Nong* means alley.

⑪ This shows that the narrator’s family is surnamed Liu – willow. It suggests that the girl, Liu Fengchun, was born in spring. Her brother, Liu Rujin, was born in autumn, when willow leaves turn golden.

and preparing for the vigil, when the postman knocked. It was a letter from the county. We opened it to find a New Year's card sent by Brother Yexin from the county junior middle school. Attached was a letter, saying he would return home that night. He sent us the card first, then he would come to our home for the vigil. Brother and I were thrilled and immediately showed Papa the card. Papa praised, "Tsk tsk! This is indeed the son of an artist! And a middle school student, too! His drawing combines the merits of both of your works: Fengchun drew two branches of flowers, the form was beautiful; but the content didn't express the New Year. Rujin drew a mouse, matching the New Year's theme; but its form was like an illustration in the children's book *Kingdom of the Small People*, which was not exactly suitable for a New Year's card. It's good that you added a long whip to encircle the words 'Happy New Year', and made it more like a painting. Now we've seen Yexin's drawing, and it has both merits. In form, the pine tree takes up the left half; the land, sea and rising sun take up the bottom; the clouds and pine needles are at the top, forming three natural borders. In content, these subjects



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