

Vanished Springs

逝水年华

Xu Yuanchong

许渊冲

Vanished Springs

逝水年华

Xu Yuanchong

许渊冲

Preface

It was a real pleasure in May 1997 to meet Xu Yuanchong again and find him to be as exuberant, if not more so, about everything as he had been when we were freshmen together in college almost 60 years ago. We had lost contact with each other in the intervening years and it was only because of my accidental happening upon a recent short article of his in the *Tsinghua Alumni News* that I finally tracked him down at Peking University. In that freshman year 1938–1939, we were both taking Professor George K. Yeh's English course at the Southwest Associated University in Kunming. The University was absolutely first-rate. Both of us owe much of our later career to what we had learned at that University. But Professor Yeh's course was a disaster: he was not interested in students and was not above practising one-up manship on us. I do not remember learning anything from him. Probably Xu did not either. After that semester Xu's path and mine diverged, since we were in different colleges—he in the college of literature, I in that of science. I did later audit a class on English poetry, but I do not remember Xu was in that class.

Xu is a prolific author. In his books he made great efforts to translate into English many of the famous poems in the long literary history of China. He especially endeavored to endow the translated lines with rich metrical and rhythmic qualities. That this is intrinsically

an almost impossible task did not deter him. How hard he must have labored! And how happy he must have been every time he succeeded in this task, as e.g. when he forged the following:

In spring the river rises as high as the sea,
And with the river's rise the moon uprises bright.
She follows the rolling waves for ten thousand li,
And where the river flows, there overflows her light.

as a translation of the beginning lines of Zhang Ruoxu's great poem *A Moonlit Night on the Spring River*. The grandeur of the intricate rhythmic and textual pattern in Zhang's original is so well captured here!

Vanished Springs is Xu's autobiography. It is the autobiography of a poet in three languages: Chinese, English and French. Reading it I realize once more how very different the life of a poet is from that of a scientist. Many years ago T. S. Eliot visited the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and one day at a party in J. R. Oppenheimer's house, Oppenheimer said to him, "In physics, we try to explain to each other what nobody has understood before. In poetry, you try to describe to others what everybody has known from the beginning." I wonder whether that is what Xu meant when he wrote in this autobiography that "in science $1 + 1 = 2$, while in arts $1 + 1 = 3$."

Chen Ning Yang*
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
August 1997

* Also named Zhenning Yang, Z. N. Yang and C. N. Yang.

Foreword

Chen Ning Yang, Nobel Prize winner in 1957, and I were classmates in our teens. We were taught in our university days that liberty was freedom to do good and democracy meant the rule of the wise and the able. After our graduation, he went to America to continue his pursuit of truth in science and I, to Europe to go on with my literary studies in creation of the beautiful. Early in the 1950s, I returned to China and since then the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean has separated us for about 50 years. As Romain Rolland said in *Jean Christophe* of the Rhine which flowed between France and Germany, gathering and absorbing all the waters of the two countries, not to divide, but to reunite them, I wish that the Pacific would not divide China and America, but merge their civilization into a peaceful, prosperous, progressive new age, and that my *Vanished Springs* might serve, as Shelley said in his *Ode to the West Wind*,

“Like wither’d leaves to quicken a new birth!”

Xu Yuanchong
Peking University
August 1997

CONTENTS

Preface	By Chen Ning Yang	i
Foreword	By Xu Yuanchong	iii
Prelude		1
Chapter I	My Green Years (1921–1932)	4
Chapter II	My High School Life (1932–1938)	20
Chapter III	My Freshman Year (1939)	37
Chapter IV	The English Department (1939–1943)	60
Chapter V	My Postgraduate Years (1943–1948)	88
Chapter VI	Life in Europe (1948–1950)	99
Chapter VII	Ten Years in the Capital (1950–1960)	113
Chapter VIII	Twenty Years North and South (1960–1980)	124
Chapter IX	My Forty Books (1983–1997)	139
Chapter X	Truth and Beauty (1997–2010)	157

PRELUDE

Why should the jeweled lute have fifty strings?
Each string, each strain evokes but vanished springs:
Dim morning dream to be a butterfly,
Amorous heart poured out in cuckoo's cry.
In moonlit pearls see tears in mermaid's eyes;
With sunburnt mirth the blue jade vaporize.
Such feeling cannot be recalled again.
It seemed long lost e'en when it was felt then.

—Li Shangyin (AD 812–858)

Beauty, mental or physical, will afford delight. Poetry or memoirs will revive memory of beauty, mental or physical, just as string and strain of a lute will evoke vanished springs the poet has seen or known.

Writing biography, said Professor Z. S. Qian (formerly Chung-shu Chien, also Qian Zhongshu), is a way to show off the biographer himself, for he may put in his own views and ideas under the name of the biographee. On the other hand, if the biographer has nothing to show off, he may describe, as he will, his own ideal to the point that none could realize who the biographee is, even viewed by himself in the mirror. An autobiographer may write at random about the friends or acquaintances he has made, or about their episodes and anecdotes. Therefore, if you want to know a man, you may read the biography he writes for others, and if you want to know the others, you may read his

autobiography. Autobiography is the biography of other people than that of the biographee.

These remarks written by Professor Qian in *Writing on the Margin of Life* reveal mental beauty. But here I use them in counter-sense while writing my memoirs, which may be biography or autobiography. If they record by chance the dreams, words and deeds of a generation, they may be called a collective biography. What is the dream of my generation or the generation of the 1920s? While young, we dreamed to enter the best schools of the country. When graduated, we wished to go abroad to learn advanced science and arts so as to make our country strong and rich, free from aggression and oppression of imperialist powers. In schools, we would not only study but also make friends with boy and girl students, as foretold by the Tang poet in his *Jeweled Lute*.

A butterfly, as Li said, is free to fly where it likes and gather honey from the flower it loves, so a student is free to study what interests him most and acquire knowledge he may put into practice. A cuckoo is the symbol of lover in Chinese verse who would shed tears when lovesick and cry till blood is oozing from his heart when forsaken by his beloved. A mermaid is a symbol of the beloved in Chinese myth and she would also shed tears when forlorn, but her tears steeped in silvery moonlight would turn into pearls. When her love is won, it would be burning by the seaside just as the jade or sapphire in the Blue Field warmed in glaring sunlight would vaporize. Such is the beauty of love as symbolized in the Chinese myth and verse written more than a thousand years ago.

Love is on the one hand beautiful and on the other mysterious. So another Tang poet, Bai Juyi, wrote a short poem to show its mystery.

In flower, she's not a flower;
Hazy, she's not a haze.
She comes at midnight hour,
She goes with starry rays.
She comes like vernal dreams that cannot stay;
She goes like morning clouds that melt away.

Li's last verse says that love is a mysterious feeling which cannot be recalled, for it is like a flower in the haze which appears dim as a morning dream and seems more beautiful for its mystery. So the vanished springs recalled in this book are on the one hand like the vernal dreams that cannot stay and the morning clouds that melt away, but on the other they would be the past revived and become eternal springs.

Up to now, I have published over 120 books in Chinese, English and French, and am known as the only one in the world to translate classical Chinese verse into English and French rhymes. But I was not a brilliant student in my young days. When I entered Southwest Associated University at Kunming in 1938, I found Z. N. Yang, Nobel medalist-to-be, in my freshman English class. He won the first honor and I the second. He obtained 100 marks in Calculus and 99 in Physics while I obtained 100 in Russian and 99 in French. Then I began to realize that one of many might become one in many. As Keats said, beauty is truth and truth beauty. And Schopenhauer said, the ultimate good is beauty, and the ultimate joy lies in the creation of the beautiful. I think if we can transform the beauty created by one country into that of another or that of the world, is it not the ultimate good as well as the ultimate joy? If it is, literary translation may be called art of re-creating the beautiful.

CHAPTER I

MY GREEN YEARS

(1921—1932)

Only the young can live in the future, and
only the old can live in the past; men were
most of them forced to live in the present, ...

—W. Durant

My Father's Dream

I was a dream of my father.

Poor, he dreamed of being rich; lowly educated, he dreamed of having a high education; looked down upon, he dreamed of climbing up; an early widower, he dreamed of having a happy married life.

That was the tragedy of his life.

My Mother's Dream

My mother was more highly educated than my father. A student of the only vocational school for girls at Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, she was good at drawing pictures of flowers and birds. She taught me how to read when I was only three years old, and endowed me with an inborn love of beauty. One day when I asked her to teach me

some new words, she couldn't for she was engaged in housework. I knocked my head against her belly without knowing she was pregnant with my sister. "Perhaps an abortion would be better," she said to my father for she had dreamed of a dishevelled woman seeking her life. Unfortunately this dream did come true; the birth of my sister brought my mother's death.

One night I was sitting alone on the bed when suddenly I perceived a shadow against the bed curtain without any object between it and the lamp. The shadow disappeared as soon as my father came in, and he said it must be the apparition of my mother.

That was the tragedy of her death.

My Native Place

I was born in Nanchang, capital of Jiangxi Province, on April 18, 1921. Jiangxi was proud of its literary talents in Chinese history. Out of the eight famous writers of China's Golden Age, three were natives of that province. Nanchang was also a capital where kings and princes had left memorable traces. Early in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), Prince Teng, the emperor's younger brother, was governor at Nanchang. He built a magnificent pavilion by the side of the River Gan. When he was banished, a new governor came and held a banquet in the pavilion. A young poet, Wang Bo (AD 649 or 650–676), wrote a poem to describe its splendor.

By riverside towers Prince Teng's Pavilion proud,
No more ringing bells punctuate the dancers' refrain.
At dawn its painted beams bar the south-flying cloud;

At dusk its uprolled screens mingle with west hills' rain.
Leisurely clouds hang o'er still waters all day long;
The world and seasons change beneath a changeless sky.
Where is the prince who once here enjoyed wine and song?
Beyond the rails the silent river still rolls by.

After the downfall of the Tang empire, the sovereign of the Southern Tang made Nanchang the capital of his kingdom. When the kingdom was conquered by the first emperor of the Song Dynasty (960–1279), its last sovereign became a captive and composed a lyrical poem in memory of his “royal palaces touching the celestial spheres,” including those in Nanchang.

When will there be no more autumn moon and spring flowers
For me, who had so many memorable hours?
My attic which last night in vernal wind did stand
Reminds me cruelly of the lost moonlit land.
Carved balustrades and marble steps must still be there,
But rosy faces cannot be as fair.
If you ask me how much my sorrow has increased,
Just see the overbrimming river flowing east!

Now neither Prince Teng's Pavilion with its painted beams and uprolled screens nor the Southern Tang palaces with their carved balustrades and marble steps can still be found there. What is left in the ancient capital is only the western hills basking in the sun or bathed in rain, the Eastern Lake where leisurely clouds cast their shadows from day to day, and the overbrimming river still ceaselessly flowing east.

My Family

When I was born, my grandfather was dead, but my grandmother was still alive. They had three daughters and three sons. Their eldest daughter, my eldest aunt, was married to a farmer living 10 miles away from the town. When we went to pay her a new year's call, we were very well entertained so that I liked the countryside better than the town in my young days. My second aunt was married to a merchant who died soon without leaving an heir, so she adopted my elder brother as son and my eldest cousin born of my third aunt as daughter. My third aunt was married to a student who went to Japan to study agriculture and became president of the Agricultural College, then highest educational institute of the province. After three daughters were born three sons. My eldest uncle worked first in the Agricultural College, then in the Provincial Bank as accountant. My grandmother said of him: "Good, he might lead a firm; otherwise, he would be a worm." He turned out good at first but died in poverty at last. My second uncle was a drinker like the poet Li Bai, but he could not write verse like him, though he was also drowned in water. My father was the youngest son, so the favorite of my grandmother, so more often than not at odds with my eldest uncle. He also worked, after his eldest brother, as accountant in Agricultural College where his brother-in-law was president. The president was pro-communist, so he fled to Shanghai to avoid the persecution of the Nationalist Government. That was the reason why my father warned me not to join any political party. That is also the reason why I do not like to work in group but prefer independence to cooperation, for only by relying on myself can I develop my creative spirit and write or translate my hundred books. Besides, the president was the eldest of 11 brothers and sisters, while

the youngest named S. I. Hsiung (S. Y. Xiong, or literally Xiong the Eleventh) was a student in Tsinghua University in the same class as Y. S. Ku* and Y. D. Wen (Wen Yiduo), professor of Tang poetry. My youngest uncle-in-law wrote in English a dramatic work called *Lady Precious Stream* and won great success in London and New York, so my father asked me to make him my model and that is the reason why I study Western literature in the university. For example, in his translation of the *Western Chamber*, he describes the love scene as follows:

And the drops of dew make the peony open.

Lin Yutang says it is faithful but not poetical, so I re-word it as follows:

The dewdrop drips, the peony sips with open lips.

My First Year at School

My primary school was situated under the shade of camphor trees not far from the Eastern Lake. I went there with my elder brother to take the entrance examination one morning in the autumn of 1926. As I knew all the words the examiner asked me to read, it was very easy for me to be admitted.

At the inaugural ceremony for the school, the new students were to make three bows to a full-length portrait of Confucius. But Confucius' portrait was soon replaced by that of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the

* Y. S. Ku (Gu Yuxiu), the first Chinese Doctor of Science in the USA.

leader of the Chinese Nationalist Party, as a result of the victory won during the Northern Expedition launched together by the Nationalists and the Communists, with Chiang Kai-shek as the commander-in-chief of the expeditionary forces. I still remember the parade held on the night of October 10, and the song sung in celebration of the victory:

Down with the Powers
And the warlord!
Victory is ours.
Sing in accord!

After that Dr. Sun's three principles—of the people, by the people and for the people—were taught, even in primary schools.

My Second Year

In my second year at school, I learned stories of historic figures such as Sima Guang (1019–1086) and Xie Daoyun (fourth century). Sima was well-known for breaking a water vat to save the life of a boy who was nearly drowned in it, and Xie for comparing a skyful of snow to wafting willow catkins.

I admired Sima for his ready wit, but I failed to appreciate Xie's comparison for I never saw willow catkins in the city. The hero I admired most was General Zhou Yu who had defeated the Northern army against heavy odds at Red Cliff on the Blue River in the year 208. On the wall of my classroom there was a picture of

him, with the following inscription by a great poet Su Shi (1037–1101):

I fancy General Zhou at the height
Of his success, with a plume fan in hand,
In a silk hood, so brave and bright,
Laughing and jesting with his bride so fair,
While enemy ships were destroyed as planned
Like castles in the air.

I admired the young general all the more because of Su Shi's verse.

My Brothers and Cousins

After class I was fond of listening to stories told by my elder brother, who was four years older than I. *The Stories of Deification* which relates the downfall of the Shang Dynasty in the 11th century BC, reads somewhat like the fall of Troy in Homer's *Iliad*, but is much simpler. For instance, we may read of King Wu's battle against the Shang troops in 1121 BC.

Shang's troops did wield
Forest-like flags afield
Wu took an oath on the Plain
To start the campaign:
"God's overhead
Don't shrink in dread!"

The battle field's wide,
 War chariots strong.
 The steeds we ride
 Gallop along.
 Our Master Jiang
 Assists the king
 To overthrow the Shang
 Like an eagle on the wing.
 A morning bright
 Displaced the night.

Later, when I compared these two stanzas with the Trojan War described in *Iliad*, I found Homer much more accurate and detailed. The death of a Trojan chieftain killed by a Greek general was described as “gaping like a fish on the hook,” while the victor against the Shang troops was described only as being “like an eagle on the wing,” which does not arouse the horror of violent death nor provide attraction through terrible beauty as Homer did. If *The Stories of Deification* can be compared to *Iliad*, then *Pilgrimage to the West*, which narrates a monk's journey to India and in which 81 difficulties are conquered by his disciples' courage and wisdom, can be likened to Homer's *Odyssey* in which Ulysses' voyage on sea is described with many adventures and dangers surmounted by his wisdom and courage. All these stories told us that the deities would help the good and punish the evil.

I was also fond of playing the game of war with cards. When I fought with my Jack against the King of my elder brother, it was I who lost the battle. But when I fought with my King against his Jack, it was still I who lost, for my brother said his Jack, like General Zhou