

林语堂  
英译诗文选



明清小品

下

外语教学与研究出版社

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## Contents 目录

- 1 What Can I Do About It? Chin Shengtan  
15 贯华堂第六才子书《西厢记》(节录) 金圣叹
- 29 Friendly Chats Chin Shengtan  
35 贯华堂所藏古本《水浒传》前自有序  
一篇今录之 金圣叹
- 41 Thirty-three Happy Moments Chin Shengtan  
54 三十三不亦快哉 金圣叹
- 68 The Appreciation of Incense Mao Pijiang  
70 品香 冒襄
- 72 On Charm in Women Li Liweng  
79 态度 李渔
- 87 How to be Happy Though Rich Li Liweng  
90 富人行乐之法 李渔

- 94 | **How to be Happy Though Poor** Li Liweng  
 96 | 贫贱行乐之法 (节录) 李渔
- 99 | **The Arts of Sleeping, Walking, Sitting, and  
 Standing** Li Liweng  
 110 | 随时即景就事行乐之法 (节录) 李渔
- 121 | **On Women's Dress** Li Liweng  
 123 | 衣衫 (节录) 李渔
- 126 | **The Mouth and the Stomach** Li Liweng  
 129 | 蔬食第一 李渔
- 132 | **Crabs** Li Liweng  
 134 | 蟹 (节录) 李渔
- 137 | **To Brother Mo, from T'aokuang Temple,  
 Hangchow, Written in 1732** Cheng Panchiao  
 140 | 雍正十年杭州韬光庵中寄舍弟墨 郑燮
- 143 | **To Fourth Brother Mo, Written While Reading  
 at Chiaoshan** Cheng Panchiao  
 145 | 焦山读书寄四弟墨 郑燮
- 147 | **To Brother Mo, Written at Shuangfengko,  
 Chiaoshan** Cheng Panchiao  
 149 | 焦山双峰阁寄舍弟墨 郑燮



- 151 To Brother Mo, Written on a Boat at Huaian  
Cheng Panchiao
- 153 淮安舟中寄舍弟墨 郑燮
- 155 To Brother Mo, from the Magistrate's Residence  
at Fanhsien Cheng Panchiao
- 158 范县署中寄舍弟墨 郑燮
- 162 Second Letter to Brother Mo, from the  
Magistrate's Residence at Fanhsien  
Cheng Panchiao
- 165 范县署中寄舍弟墨第二书 郑燮
- 168 Fourth Letter to Brother Mo, from the  
Magistrate's Residence at Fanhsien  
Cheng Panchiao
- 174 范县署中寄舍弟墨第四书 郑燮
- 179 Second Letter to Brother Mo, from the  
Magistrate's Residence at Weihsien  
Cheng Panchiao
- 183 潍县署中与舍弟墨第二书（节录） 郑燮
- 186 Third Letter to Brother Mo from Weihsien  
Cheng Panchiao
- 189 潍县寄舍弟墨第三书 郑燮

- 194 | Fourth Letter to Brother Mo from Weihsien  
Cheng Panchiao
- 196 | 潍县寄舍弟墨第四书 郑燮
- 198 | Fifth Letter to Brother Mo, from the Magistrate's  
Residence at Weihsien Cheng Panchiao
- 200 | 潍县署中与舍弟墨第五书(节录) 郑燮
- 202 | The Nine-blessings Couch Ting Shiungfei
- 205 | 九喜榻记 丁雄飞
- 207 | Taiyu Predicting Her Own Death  
Tsao Shuehchin
- 212 | 黛玉葬花诗 曹雪芹
- 215 | Eggplant Terrine Tsao Shuehchin
- 220 | 凤姐说茄子鲞 曹雪芹
- 222 | A Thought on Immortality Chang Shihyuan
- 224 | 自立说 张士元
- 226 | In Memory of a Woman Shen Fu
- 241 | 《浮生六记》二节 沈复
- 253 | On the Importance of Partiality  
Kung Tsechen
- 258 | 论私 龚自珍

263	A Family Letter	Tseng Kuofan
266	家书(节录)	曾国藩
269	Human Contradictions	Wang Kaiyun
273	《秋醒词》序	王闿运
278	Beautiful Singing	Liu Ao
283	老残游记(节录)	刘鹗
289	编后记	





# What Can I Do About It?

Prefaces I and II to *The Western Chamber*

Chin Shengtan

c. 1609-1661

Chin was a great commentator on Wang Shihfu's play *The Western Chamber*. He was among the first to regard fiction and drama as literature on a par with the classics. The two prefaces were entitled "Lamentation over the Ancients" and "A Gift to Posterity" respectively. I have tried to preserve the conscious repetition of certain phrases as a characteristic of Chin's style.

## I.

Someone may ask me why I have undertaken to make a commentary on *The Western Chamber* and publish it. I can only say, "I hardly know myself. I just had to do it."

Ages have passed since life began in the universe, and months and years have whizzed by and vanished like a lightning flash or dissolving clouds, or a passing hurricane or flowing water. In this month and year, there is this temporary me which, too, shall pass away like a lightning flash or dissolving clouds, or a passing hurricane or flowing water. However, fortunately there is for the present this me, which gives rise to the question: How is this present me going to employ its time? I have thought about doing something, but the thought also occurs to me that I do not know whether I shall be able to do it, and even if I do it, that something which I shall have accomplished will also pass away like a lightning flash or dissolving clouds, or a passing hurricane or flowing water. Now if I wish to do something and know beforehand that that which I do will pass away, will not then what I do be in vain? Thus one lands in the hopeless dilemma between wishing to do something by the present me and knowing that what I do shall pass away presently. What indeed can I do about it?

Did not the ancients also know this? Countless ancient people stood and sat at this spot where I am standing or sitting now. Did they not know secretly that one day they would be gone and someone else would be here to take their place? They knew that they could do nothing about it, accepted it, and kept quiet.

I therefore cannot help a feeling of dissatisfaction with the thoughtlessness of the universe. I never begged to come into this life. I should have been either given this life to live forever, or not at all. For no reason I came into this life. For no reason that which came into this life became me, and for no reason the me which came into this life is not made to live forever, and is furthermore endowed with a feeling and a consciousness to regret it. Alas! I do not know where the immortals live and whether they can come back to life. But even if I knew where they lived and they could come back to life, would they not join me in this lamentation over the universe?

I suspect that the ancients knew this well, and furthermore, being more intelligent than myself, they knew that the universe was not really thoughtless, but that the universe, too, could do nothing about it. For if there was to be no life, there would not be this universe; but since there is this universe, there has to be life. That is perfectly true, but it would be unfair to say that because the universe gives life, therefore it made a decision to bring this particular me into life. For the universe simply gives life to all creation and is unaware of whom or what it has created, and the creatures cannot know each what or who it is. If one is sure that that which lives today is me, then it is equally sure that that which will be born tomorrow will be not-me. At the same time, the not-me which will be born tomorrow will regard itself as veritably me. This should puzzle the universe itself, and we cannot know who is to blame.

Now if the universe never deliberately brought me to life but gave life to something which happens to be me, then all I can do will be just to follow along. Since the universe never

considered giving life to this me, then all this me can do will be to let it pass like a lightning flash or dissolving clouds, or a passing hurricane or flowing water. And as one can do nothing about one's coming and going, one can also do nothing about this short interval when the temporary me exists except to find temporary diversions to occupy one's time where real diversions are difficult to find. One way would be to till a farm and live in retirement, like Chuko Liang before he was called to power. Another way would be to live like Chuko Liang after he was called to power, and attend to a thousand duties and responsibilities to the neglect of one's meals until one died. Both ways would do. Another way would be to suffer from hunger and cold and pray for a better future life; another, to be married to a princess and be a power at court, and live in a riot of luxuries and entertainments, with swarms of servants; another, to eat one bowl of meager congee a day and sleep under a tree in snow and ice, and give 48,000 sermons on salvation and save life in countless numbers like the sand of the Ganges. All these would do as occupations to fill the interval of time.

Then one thinks as follows. It is true enough that that which was born before me was not-me, and that which will be born after me will also be not-me. Therefore that which exists now and is regarded as me may not be really me. If that which is me is not really me, then I should not bother to wonder what to do about it, but equally there is no reason why I should not wonder what to do about it. One may still hope that the me is real and therefore I should not waste its time. On the other hand, if one knows that the me is not really me, why should one not let it waste, and waste completely, its time? For it is the not-me which wastes its own time, and not me who wastes it. Then one may further completely waste time by thinking that this time should not be wasted, but should be carefully harnessed and utilized to some good purpose. But even then, it may be the not-me which completely wastes its own time by thinking not to waste it. One may go so far as to concentrate one's energies to create something worth while which may last to eternity and thus completely waste the completely wasted time. However, the complete wasting of the completely wasted time will be done by



not-me and not by me. If so, one can very well, too, let me waste the time of the not-me. I can squander the energies of not-me for my own pleasure. I can regard the left hand of not-me as my left hand and tap the belly of not-me, or regard the right hand of not-me as my own right hand and finger the beard of not-me. One can do all these things. When the not-me writes a poem, I can sing it. When the not-me sings, I can listen. When the not-me listens, I can dance for joy. And when the not-me dances for joy, I can rejoice over my immortal fame.

Now we do not know what the objects are which are before me and which we call an inkstone, a pen, a piece of paper, but since they go by those names, we will call these things by their usual names. We do not know what is a hand or a thought, but we, too, will call the hand and the thought by these names. We call this place by the window "here" and this present time "today." And so they stand for "here" and "today" for me. As I write, a bee flies into my window and an ant crawls along the balcony. The ant and the bee are enjoying their present temporary life

even as I am enjoying my temporary existence. When I become an "ancient one," so too will the ant and the bee become an "ancient bee" and an "ancient ant." What mystery and what joy that I should be living today at this hour by this place before this window with pen, inkstone, and paper spread before me, while my mind thinks and my hand writes in the company of the present bee and the present ant!<sup>[1]</sup> My readers born after me will never know that there is an ant and a bee at this moment when I am writing. But if the readers after me cannot know about this ant and this bee when I am writing, then such readers do not really know about me. But I know about my readers in the future. They who will read this piece of composition as a temporary occupation or even without thought of a temporary occupation will be doing so because they don't know what to do about it, seeing that life passes like a lightning flash or dissolving clouds, or a passing hurricane or flowing water.

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[1] This is Zen.

I have therefore come to realize that wasting one's time is one way of occupying it, not wasting time is also another way of occupying it, and not to mind going on wasting time even knowing that it is a waste of time is also another way of occupying it. I have so labored on this book because I want these commentaries to be superb, and I want them to be superb because I have dared. I have dared because I have well understood life. I have well understood life, and therefore I can do what I naturally want to do. To do what I naturally want to do is also a way of occupying time. I have no time to consider whether my future readers know or do not know about me. Alas! in the same way, I wish to lament over the ancients who were more intelligent than myself, but I cannot know who they were! I have therefore labored over the commentary and published it as a form of lamentation over the ancients. This lamentation over the ancients is not really for the ancients, but just another way of occupying time.