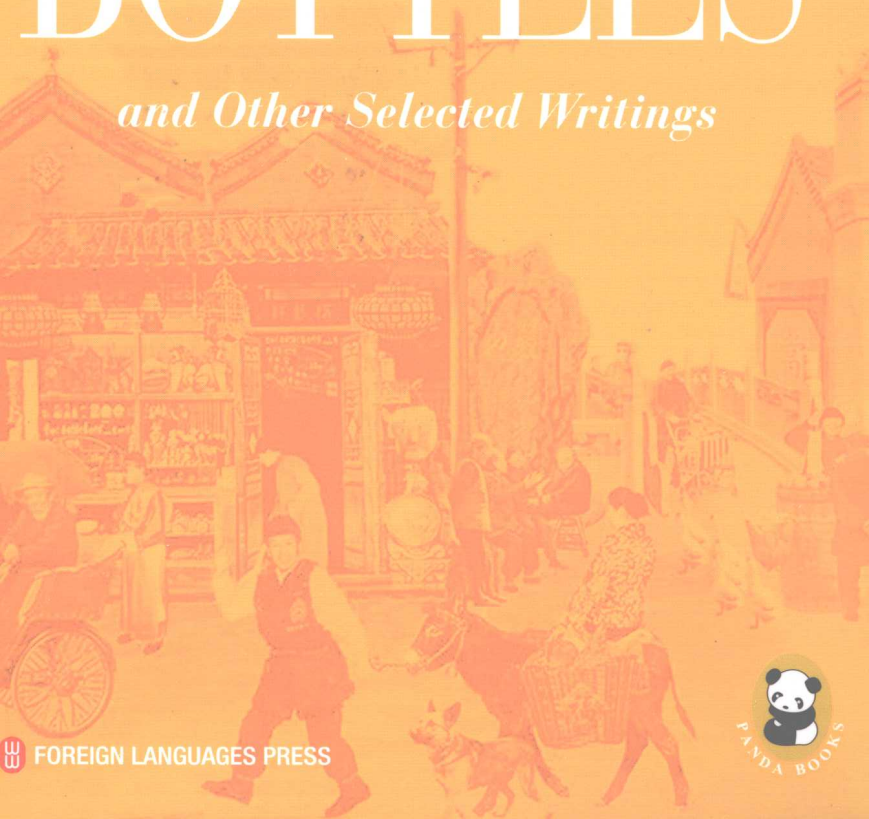


DENG YOUNGMEI

SNUFF

BOTTLES

and Other Selected Writings



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Panda Books

Snuff-Bottles

Deng Youmei was born into a poor family in Tianjin in 1911. When his father lost his job, he and his family moved to Deng Village in Shandong, where his forefathers had lived. After the Japanese invaded North China in 1937, he became a messenger in the Eighth Route Army. Being too small, however, he was sent back to Tianjin, where he led an itinerant life doing odd jobs until he was forced to go to Japan as a labourer, experiencing all kinds of hardships. In 1945, before the Japanese surrender, he returned to China and joined the New Fourth Army as a journalist. He took part in the War of Liberation and wrote a number of short stories based on army life and his life in Japan.

In the 1950s he was wrongly criticized for writing *On the Precipice*, a vivid, simple and much read story about the troubled lives of intellectuals, and sent to do manual work for over a decade. With the end of the "cultural revolution" in 1976, Deng's energy returned and he started writing again, producing several novellas and stories on modern themes and folklore, which were well received.



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藏书章



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Preface

Literature may reflect the ethos of a country or a nation, while at the same time it can transcend the limits of time and space to most widely resonate a truly universal humanity. Literary works of art that move hearts may even inspire the compassion of strangers toward a people or country...

This "Panda Series" of books, expertly translated into English, compiles the works of well-known modern and contemporary Chinese authors around themes such as the city and the countryside, love and marriage, minority folk stories and historical legends. These works reflect the true spirit and everyday lives of the Chinese people, while widely resonating with their changing spiritual and social horizons.

Published from the 1980s, through more than 100 titles in English, this series continues to open wider the window for readers worldwide to better understand China through its new literature. Many familiar and fond readers await the latest in this "Panda Series." This publication of the "Panda Series" consolidates and looks back at earlier released literary works to draw new readers, while stirring the fond memories of old friends, to let more people share the experiences and views of the Chinese people in recent decades. We express our sincere appreciation to all authors, translators and editors who have engaged in their dedicated and meticulous work over the years to bring out these works. It is their passion and endeavor that have enabled this series to appear now in luminous distinction.

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Foreword

Deng Youmei, the son of a poor peasant, was born in Pingyuan County, Shandong in 1931. As a child he lived in Tianjin, in the same compound as the destitute yet arrogant concubine of a Manchu noble, and his interest in Manchu Bannermen dates from that time. He had little formal education but a very chequered career, caught up while a boy in the resistance to Japanese aggression. At eleven he delivered messages for the 8th Route Army. In his early teens he was carried off to Japan to work in a factory; then he joined a cultural troupe in the New 4th Army and was a reporter attached to the People's Liberation Army.

After Liberation Deng came to Beijing. In 1951 he started writing. He received encouragement from Zhao Shuli, the popular author of *Rhymes of Li Youcai* who used traditional forms and colloquial language enjoyed by illiterate peasants. Zhao's advocacy of popular literature had a strong influence on him. Another important mentor was the writer Zhang Tianyi, his tutor in '52 when he studied in the Literary Institute of the Writers' Association. In '57 his story *On the Cliff* won an award. But Deng considers his early writings too simple and stereotyped with their contrived happy endings. "My stories had a tiger's head and snake's tail," he says.

After he was made a Rightist in '57 Deng worked for twenty years as a manual labourer in Beijing and the provinces. In '62 he went to the Northeast to work in a clock factory. As it had no dormitory he bought a shelter which he shared for six years with a Manchu. From this man and a Manchu actor he learned a great deal about old Beijing and the life of Manchus there.

After the fall of the Gang of Four he went on writing. *Our Army Commander*, which deals with Marshal Chen Yi, won an award in '78.

In 1979 Deng tried his hand at fiction with more local colour. The Gang had tried to stamp out old customs, an intrinsic part of the cultural heritage, but some of these were reappearing and Deng believed that young people should learn about them. His *Taoran Pavilion Park*, set in Beijing, won a short story prize, increasing his confidence. He followed it up with *Black Cat*, *White Cat*, *Han the Forger*, *Na Wu*, *Snuff-Bottles* and other tales about life in Beijing past and present with obscure townsfolk as the main characters. This illustrates a new trend in Chinese writing. For years writers here were fettered, required to write about workers, peasants and soldiers. Intellectuals were not eligible as heroes, let alone effete Bannermen at the turn of the century. In the fifties even Lao She's superb play *Teahouse*, dealing with the lives of ordinary citizens in three historical periods in Beijing, was criticized in some quarters as unhealthy. Now writers can face up to reality and tackle any theme — provided they make no attack on the socialist system.

There has been an upsurge of popular literature, both indigenous and imported, with translations ranging from Jules Verne and Dumas to Agatha Christie and Arthur

Haley. Deng's Beijing stories have the best qualities of popular literature, as they are compulsive reading with unforgettable characters and packed with information. Indeed, one of his reasons for writing about old Beijing is to fill in a gap in young people's general knowledge. Ironically, for a country with such a long history which has produced brilliant historians, history teaching in Chinese schools tends to be excessively dull. For generations most Chinese learned their history from classical novels, the theatre or story-tellers, and few novelists in recent years have tackled historical themes. Deng's work is thus much to be welcomed. And he was bold to enter this field, inevitably inviting comparison with one of the greatest writers of this century — Lao She, Beijing born and bred.

Deng recalls that after the Gang of Four was toppled new fiction appeared like mushrooms after rain, and he wondered how best he could make his contribution. Comparing his qualifications with those of other writers, he decided that many ex-Rightists could write about their painful experiences, and he was less skilled than Wang Meng or Liu Binyan in highlighting social problems. His forte was an extensive knowledge of Beijing and its history, people of all walks of life there and their social customs. During the "cultural revolution" when there was a dearth of novels, he had bought some works on antiques and Buddhism, and the knowledge so acquired became grist to his mill, as did the anecdotes he picked up from actors, bird-fanciers and old Beijing residents who went each morning with him to Taoran Pavilion Park to practise Chinese boxing.

Deng's wife in her article introducing *Snuff-Bottles* explains her misgivings when he chose this new line. She

was reassured by the glowing reviews he received. He has been compared with Balzac because he writes the history that many historians omit, the history of social conventions and everyday life. Others have compared his work with genre paintings, for he covers a broad canvas, achieves a rich texture, and graphically conjures up bygone times researched in detail.

Many Chinese writers today are drawing on Western techniques. Deng, however, has developed traditional story-telling. *Snuff-Bottles* has a lead-in about snuff-bottles before the action starts, a practice dating back to the stories told in market-places in 11th-century China. Similarly, it ends with a hint that there is more to come. Deng also has the old story-tellers' mastery of thumbnail sketches and dramatic dialogue. His characters come to life, each one unique, each completely convincing, and their setting is unmistakably old Beijing, arousing nostalgia in senior citizens.

The complex characters created by Deng are a far cry from the stereotyped heroes and villains common in the first thirty years after Liberation. They are more reminiscent of those drawn by Lu Xun, some being failures or outcasts with few redeeming features. Na Wu, the incompetent son of a bankrupt Manchu family, is arrogant, dishonest and easily fooled. His decadence is tragic. Like him affable, timid Wu Shibao, descended from martial Bannermen, has been brought up with no trade to live on his pension. He sets great store by "face". When his pension stops he is willing to work for a living only if he cannot be seen demeaning himself in this way. He fails to take up arms to resist the imperialist troops, but refuses to disgrace China by painting foreign inva-

ders inside his snuff-bottles. He is lucky to be taken in hand by the potter's strong-minded daughter.

Not long after Liberation Zhou Enlai warned the children of high-ranking cadres to learn a lesson from the degeneracy of the descendants of Manchu Bannermen, and not to live as parasites cashing in on the achievements of their parents. Deng's message to the younger generation today is somewhat similar. He wants them to understand that China had reached a dead end, could only be revitalized by revolution; to realize how New China has evolved from the old, and work hard to build up the country.

Deng decided to write about snuff-bottles after reading an account of Wang Xisan, a painter of snuff-bottle interiors, and his trials during the "cultural revolution". Wang painted bottles for his brigade to sell to finance their water conservancy project. He was training apprentices and doing well till the Red Guards attacked him for his "decadence". Deng then read up on snuff-bottles and made friends with old craftsmen, including Wang Xisan. While collecting material he was struck by the patriotism and strong sense of self-respect of Chinese craftsmen. In a temple in Foshan he saw a bronze incense-burner cast during the Boxer Uprising, with four legs planted on four foreign aggressors. The man who made that did so at the risk of his life. This helped Deng to visualize an honest, high-minded craftsman who would never stoop to flattery or deceit, and so he created the memorable potter Xie.

We look forward to reading more of these characters' adventures. Unfortunately Deng's output has been slowed down by his duties in the secretariat of the Writers'

Association. However, he plans to write a sequel describing the fate of snuff-bottle painters from the founding of the Republic in 1911 to the invasion of China by Japan. A further sequel is planned to deal with the post-Liberation period.

1985

Gladys Yang

Snuff-Bottles

OF late the huge tobacco industry has produced cigarettes for people of all walks of life the whole world over, superseding the traditional taste for snuff. Too bad, but there it is. Snuff is much better for your health than cigarettes or cigars. Sniffed for its pungent odour, it serves as a stimulant or prophylactic, and you don't poison yourself by inhaling smoke. You can sniff it for your own enjoyment without affecting anyone next to you. And by covering your mouth with a handkerchief when you sneeze, you avoid polluting the environment. Snuff was brought to China in 1582 during the Ming dynasty by Matteo Ricci.* The Kang Xi and Qian Long reigns (1662-1795) were its golden age, when nobles and commoners alike took snuff. Then those who couldn't abide snuff must have seemed like the old fogeys today who can't dance disco. When Kang Xi went to Nanjing, western missionaries offered him many presents. He declined them all but the snuff. And readers of *A Dream of Red Mansions*** will remember that when one of the serving-maids had a stuffed-up nose, the young master made her sniff some Western snuff, so that a few sneezes cured her. Cigarettes in all their long history have never attained such a high reputation.

* Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), an Italian Jesuit, was sent to China by Portugal in the tenth year of Wan Li.

** A very popular 18th-century novel.

Another confirmation of the superiority of snuff is that from the end of the Ming dynasty, when it came into vogue, our craftsmen used their traditional skills to improve on the manufacture of snuff-bottles. Though too small to hold wine or rice, these bottles embody the arts of jade-polishing, gold-inlaying, carving, ceramics, lacquer, painting and cloisonné in a unique Chinese craft. In the course of the last few centuries many fine bottles have been lost or destroyed, but some superb examples still remain. They may be made of metal, stone, jade, glass, pottery, porcelain, bamboo, wood, mother-of-pearl, horn, ivory, coconut or gourds. There are subdivisions too. Thus porcelain bottles can be classified according to the kilns where they were fired. . . . In a word, these little bottles exemplify the level of Chinese craftsmanship and the characteristics of specific periods. Hence the best fetch very high prices on the world market. At an auction in Germany in 1976, within a few minutes a Chinese snuff-bottle was sold for two million marks. After the death of the well-known American connoisseur Mr Stevenson, his collection of Chinese snuff-bottles fetched U.S. \$1,400,000. He had remained a bachelor all his life, devoting himself to the study of snuff-bottles; and experts in this field compare his researches with those of Mme Curie. In the West there are two international associations to study snuff-bottles, the members of which are increasing every year. So it is no empty boast to claim that our snuff-bottles have blazed a new trail in art.

It is true that for thousands of years millions of people have studied, worked, fallen in love, married and raised families without setting eyes on a single snuff-bottle. But it would be wrong to underestimate snuff-bottles, in