

YE SHENGTAO

HOW
MR. PAN
WEATHERED
THE STORM

and Other Selected Writings

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

稻草人：叶圣陶作品选：英文 / 叶圣陶 著

北京：外文出版社，2009 (熊猫丛书)

ISBN 978-7-119-05889-4

I. 稻... II. ①叶...②唐... III. 童话－作品集－中国－当代－英文 IV. I287.7

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字 (2009) 第122944号

责任编辑：刘芳念 佟 盟

封面设计：周伟伟

印刷监制：韩少乙

稻草人 叶圣陶作品选

叶圣陶 著

唐 笙 等 英译

© 2009 外文出版社

出 版 人：呼宝民

总 编 辑：李振国

出版发行：外文出版社

中国北京百万庄大街24号

邮政编码 100037

<http://www.flp.com.cn>

印 制：求是印务中心

开本：850mm×1168mm 1/32 印张：8.5

2009年第1版 第1次印刷

(英)

ISBN 978-7-119-05889-4

06000 (平)

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Panda Books

How Mr. Pan Weathered the Storm

Ye Shengtao is well known as a writer, editor, publisher and educator. Ye Shengtao was born in 1894 in Suzhou. He began to write before he was twenty and in 1921 became one of the founding members of a famous literary society called *Wenxue Yanjiu Hui*.

His major works include the novel *Schoolmaster Ni Huanzhi*; the short stories *How Mr Pan Weathered the Storm*, *A Declaration* and *A Year of Good Harvest*; the prose works *Lotus Root and Water Shield*, *Traveler's Words* and *Late-night Food* and the children's tales *The Scarecrow*, *The Statue of the Ancient Hero* and *Experience of a Locomotive*. He has also written many essays, poems and literary criticism.

Ye Shengtao was appointed vice-minister of education soon after the establishment of New China.



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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

First Edition 2009

ISBN 978-7-119-05889-4

© Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, China, 2009

Published by Foreign Languages Press

24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China

<http://www.flp.com.cn>

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation

35 Chegongzhuang Xilu, Beijing 100044, China

P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

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

Wei Shang

WHEN Ye Shengtao, who was born in Suzhou in Jiangsu Province in 1894, celebrated his ninety-first birthday last year, he was hailed by many as "Old Mr. Ye", less because of his age than because they regard him as a revered elder, having themselves learned much from him during their formative years. A working life of over seventy years has brought him considerable achievement in writing, education and publishing. He published his first original piece before he was twenty, and in 1921 became one of the twenty founder members of the Literary Study Society, which advocated literature for living, demanding that writing reflect contemporary life and aiming to advance the progress of society. As the present collection of short stories and children's tales shows, he has never turned his back on these principles, because of course they are his own.

Apart from short stories and children's tales, he has written a great many essays and poems and done much work in literary criticism, having introduced many a young writer to society. As an educator, he began as a primary school teacher after leaving secondary school at eighteen, going on to teach in secondary school and

Wei Shang, born in Suzhou in 1918, is an editor.

university. Appointed vice-minister of education after the establishment of New China, he laid emphasis on fostering students' powers of study, work and life rather than the traditional "inculcative" methods, so as to form good habits in early life. The dark side of the old teaching is a frequent motif in his writing, where he often expounds his views on education, as in the novel *Schoolmaster Ni Huanzhi*, whose hero is a teacher committed to reform.

Ye Shengtao is also well known as an editor and publisher, having published or encouraged with his appreciation the first efforts of the influential group of writers who emerged in China at the end of the twenties and the beginning of the thirties. He sees an educational duty in publishing, particularly with regard to reading materials for children and young people, and has himself on the practical side edited a great many books, periodicals and texts for them.

Since 1949, Ye Shengtao has concentrated on educational work, varying his direction of school book production with a considerable body of written opinion, mostly popular discussion of language and literature teaching. This has rather taken over from literary pursuits proper — apart from criticism — so that with the one exception of *To Goose Sands by Sheepskin Raft*, the works in the present selection were all written before 1949.

We have chosen ten short stories, eight essays and nine children's tales. The essays deal mainly with life experience, whether of external scenery or of inner feeling. His descriptions are minute, and the blend of emotion and scenery is a direct inheritance from the style of the traditional essay and poem.

The first five of the short stories date from before the revolution of 1927, when China was partitioned among constantly fighting warlords. *How Mr Pan Weathered the Storm* shows the awkward plight and contradictory psychology of a small-town headmaster caught up in such a war. The false alarm of the city headmaster who is the hero of *The Package* is also a product of the times and an indirect reflection of the white terror wielded by the warlords against the revolutionaries. *Night* also tells of the white terror, but this time after the failure of that revolution, when the oppressors are no longer the old warlords but the right wing of the Kuomintang making its first entrance, while the oppressed are now the Communists and the revolutionary people. The heroine is an uncultured old woman whose daughter and son-in-law, both primary school teachers, have fallen victims to this butchery. So sudden was the progress of events that many people were taken off their guard and, like the old woman, sank for a time into the depths of misery and bewilderment, only to come to their senses later and, again like the old woman, who "decided bravely to perform a mother's duty once more", gather their forces and prepare the revolution afresh.

The protagonists of the next four short stories are varied and suffer variously under Kuomintang rule, both spiritually and in their everyday lives. *A Trainee* describes how the dark cloud of unemployment loomed over every family and over the souls of children. In *A Minor Flutter*, Mr. and Mrs. Wu think they have been clever in engineering a little bargain out of the silver dollar nationalization fracas, but their sensitivity and alarm surely betray a loss of confidence in their own

future. The headmaster in *A Declaration* desires only peace and quiet, but is not allowed by government pressure to keep on Mr. Wang, the drafter of the said document, who has no choice but to "walk out of the school gates without looking back", although he has done nothing wrong, having only called for the protection of territorial integrity, reflecting the universal just call of the Chinese people faced with a Japanese military invasion.

In contrast to these, *A Year of Good Harvest*, *A Life*, *Bitter Greens* and *A Stroll at Dawn* deal with the miserable fate of the peasantry and its progressive worsening that could turn an exceptional harvest into a veritable major tragedy unfathomable to peasants who had no means of grasping that the rural economy was on the verge of collapse.

These ten pieces of fiction show Ye Shengtao's rigorous approach to creative writing, confining himself to material which he can feel for and understand, most of it concerned with the unpleasant aspects of contemporary society. But he does this not solely as an expose. As he said in the thirties, "There is little that is satisfactory, and since I have neither the strength to change that nor the ability to keep urging my good intentions on others, I can only embark upon a course of literary castigation." He fictionalized the unsatisfactory and showed it truthfully so as to excite repugnance and indignation and build up a fervent desire to reform an irrational society. His aim in writing is thus perfectly clear, and his works have been of some positive value in pushing society towards progress.

Ye Shengtao sets great store by children's literature, which in the years when he taught in primary school

was archaic and scarce. He began to write children's tales in an effort to correct this situation, becoming the first such writer in the history of modern Chinese literature. Like many other teachers at the time, he thought at first that children should be brought up in a beautiful environment amid beautiful thoughts, their pure souls protected from contamination and hurt. It was not long before he changed his mind, realizing that children too live in the real world where not much is satisfactory, a state of affairs which cannot and should not be kept from them as long as instruction takes forms which they can accept and accept enjoyably.

In the present selection, *The Seed* resembles a European children's tale in having little to do with real life, in contradistinction to *The Thrush*, *The Scarecrow* and *The Sensitive Plant*, which show children the dreadful sufferings of the labouring classes in a society which is so unfair that everyone should be as ashamed of it as the sensitive plant is and sympathize with and console the labourers as much as the thrush does. The basic point, however, is that society needs thorough reform so as to be quite rid of such suffering: it is no use having nothing but sympathy, like the good-for-nothing straw man who collapses in his field from ineffectual grief.

The Statue of an Ancient Hero is about the purpose of life, but despite its serious point it has been as esteemed by teachers and as popular with children as has *The Scarecrow*; a meaningful life is one of actual service to the people, like that of the paving stone, rather than an emblem of non-existent glory like that of the statue.

The other four are more redolent of their times. *The*

Emperor's New Clothes shows children how to deal with rulers who cover up the truth; *The Silkworm and the Ant* tells them how attitudes to workers differ in different societies; *The Language of Birds and Animals* satirizes two fascist devil-kings who cannot get on with each other; and *The Experience of a Locomotive* recounts two struggles of a student demanding that the government resist Japanese militarism.

The last two of these are reworkings in children's tale form of actual events which children in China ought to know of, since they affect their destiny just as they do that of all Chinese and of the whole world. They are history as far as today's children are concerned, but it is no bad thing for children to grow up knowing something about history and the process of social change, and these tales retain the respect of writers and teachers.

Ye Shengtao is also politically active and serves as vice-chairman of the National People's Political Consultative Conference. His works are by no means unknown outside China, having been translated into several Asian, European and African languages and made the subject of specialist studies in many countries.

June 21, 1985

Translated by Simon Johnstone

A Life

VILLAGE born she was never waited on or made up, never taught the feudal precepts for women or the bourgeois ideas of equality and freedom. She was indeed a very simple creature.

After leaving her mother's womb, by the time she was able to walk and talk she helped her parents glean paddy stalks and pluck herbs. At fifteen they married her off. For sooner or later she would belong to some other family anyway, and each extra year they kept her meant the cost of an extra year's food, clothing and so on. Better, then, get her off their hands early to save themselves trouble and expense simply to enrich other people.

Her husband's family had so much field work that they needed to hire help. Even if this new daughter-in-law couldn't save them taking on a hired hand, she was worth half an ox to them. In less than a year, to her bewilderment, she gave birth to a son; for it seemed to her only yesterday that she had slept in her mother's arms, and now here she was holding a baby of her own. He had no cradle, no snug clothes, no airy, sunny nursery, and it was only at night that he could enjoy sleeping in her arms; by day he slept in a dark corner of the room. In less than six months he died. She cried and cried as if her heart would break. Her mother-in-law accused her of not knowing how to look after children

and inveighed against her for causing the death of a perfectly good grandson. Her father-in-law swore that his line would die out — she was too ill-starred to rear children. Her husband merely remarked that he didn't care if ten sons died, if only it would bring him luck in gambling. She didn't try to fathom what they meant, simply crying from morning till night.

One day she made a strange discovery. When she opened her chest to take out the blue cotton-padded clothes that were part of her dowry, she found they had disappeared. Later, her husband when drunk told her he had pawned them. Winter came very quickly. The west wind chilled people to the bone. She screwed up her courage to beg him to get her clothes out of hock. For that he boxed her ears a couple of times. She was used to his knocking her about, which always reduced her to tears.

Today when she wept her mother-in-law snapped, "Crying? Want to drown us all in your tears?"

That made her sob still more loudly. In a rage her mother-in-law snatched up the pestle for washing clothes and thwacked her back several times. For good measure her husband gave her two more slaps.

This was more than she could bear. The thought of tomorrow and the day after . . . the future . . . filled her with fearful dismay. The next morning before it was light, she slipped out of the house while luckily her husband was still asleep. The west wind was like a knife and stung her face. Never mind, it hurt less than his beatings. She hurried a dozen *li* without stopping for breath till she came to the river bank, then waited for the passenger boat to town.

When finally the boat came, she went aboard. The