

AH CHENG

UNFILLED GRAVES

and Other Selected Writings

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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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Forward

Wang Zengqi

THERE'S an old saying that goes like this: A poverty-stricken family finds it difficult to arrange a meal; a busy man has no time to draft an article. I would love to be able to close my door, refuse to receive guests, and spend a couple of weeks reading Ah Cheng's novels before writing this article, but, alas, it is not possible. At the end of each year, there is always a stream of people coming to my door asking me to contribute articles. The moment I sit down at my desk, someone is sure to knock on my door, and the precious inspiration that's just come to me simply disappears. Yang Dehua has just finished compiling a selection of Ah Cheng's novels, and is waiting for this preface. It looks as if I won't be free until next spring, so I'll just have to jot down a few words as they occur to me.

I'm delighted to have been asked to write a preface to Ah Cheng's stories. It's an enjoyable task and my duty, too.

When I read through his selected stories, and some of them for the second time, I couldn't help exclaiming: What a rich experience of life he has had! I envy him for it.

I once stayed in Harbin for several days. I know that the Songhua River flows through the city; that there are several Russian-style houses, Orthodox

churches, a Qiulin Company; that Harbiners like to drink beer and eat ices.

But not until I had read Ah Cheng's stories did I know that there are also areas with prostitutes, boat girls, and poor villages where people live on weeds. Only then did I understand what Harbin and its surroundings are really like. Ah Cheng's Harbin is so full of bizarre customs and unusual happenings that it seems like a strange and foreign land. Nevertheless, this is the real Harbin. I feel it's only by reading Ah Cheng's descriptions that we begin to see Harbin as it really is.

A novelist should first experience life; secondly, dare to describe life; and thirdly, be able to write about it.

One character, who is actually Ah Cheng himself, is the writer Ah Cheng who turns up time and again in his stories. Why does he call himself "Writer Ah Cheng"? It's because he never forgets that he is a writer and that he is responsible to his readers for telling them the truth. It is a responsibility that requires seriousness and painstaking efforts. He says Writer Ah Cheng works extremely hard and this is obviously true.

"Six New Year Sketches" deserves the fame it has won. The stories have a unity, symmetry, and are beautifully written, with natural beginnings and endings, which mark the maturity of the writer's skill. These days, young writers begin at a high level and grow mature quite quickly, something that writers of the 1950s can only admire.

Among the stories I like most are "The Kind-Hearted Prostitute" and "Unfilled Graves", which, like two pieces of lyric poetry, warm my heart with the kind of warmth precious in an icy-cold, snowy winter. The writ-

er depicts the different experiences of two beautiful, simple northern women. Both stories are highly romantic and reveal the love the writer feels for the two women and his other characters. He celebrates the poetry and beauty within them, innate qualities which are neither forced upon them by the writer, nor by his wishful thinking.

One criterion used in judging a writer is to see whether he has developed a distinctive style of his own. Ah Cheng's style is highly-developed. His sentences are particularly short. Short sentences bring about short paragraphs. As a result, the language is terse yet rhythmic and full of vitality.

Ah Cheng's writings uses a combination of Mandarin, Harbin dialect and archaic forms. He frequently quotes from ancient poetry, *ci* and folk songs. But it is puzzling why in his description of life on the Northeastern Plain, folk songs from the Northwest are sometimes sung. Folk songs usually have a strong local flavour, though some may travel beyond their regional boundaries.

Ah Cheng's vocabulary is striking in his use of uncommon, rarely-used words, an inevitable and understandable trait in a young writer. It's worth listening to the opinion of the Song-dynasty writer, Fan Xiwen, who writes in his *Night Writings*:

"Composing a poem by resorting to rarely-used words is, of course, a fault. Only when the meaning of a whole line can be condensed within an uncommon word, should the word be used."

He gives examples of words used in Tang-dynasty poems, saying, "All of these are rarely-used words, nevertheless, they appear appropriate and familiar with-

in the context." So, when composing poems and essays, only use uncommon words if their skillful use renders them familiar to the reader.

The tone of Ah Cheng's writing is generally calm and controlled. But at times, he succumbs to an outburst of emotion. For example:

"Song then boarded the vessel, and the two, separated by a curtain of rain, waved to each other. She wanted to shout out to him, 'I'm carrying your child...' but the steam whistle screamed, causing both rain and river to shudder."

The contrast between cool, self-control and ardent expression of emotion gives his work extraordinary power.

He also has a strong sense of humour. Third Brother is a poet who loves talking about sex: "Asexuality, androgenousness, *yin* (female) and *yang* (male), *yang* and *yin*, and the universe formed by *yinyang*, universe, male, female, and so forth. That's all there is to it." Third Brother's wife, a member of the Communist Party, works in a government office, and hates it when he brings amateur writers to the house to discuss sex. She accuses him of being good-for-nothing and shameless: "Someday the police are going to come for you, rogue and send you to the quarries. That'll fix you. Then we'll see if you are sexual or not. Damn you!"

Early one morning while reading the works of Ah Cheng and others, I had a dream: A camel was eating a bunch of roses.

Now that was a ridiculous dream!

Unfilled Graves

NESTLED among imbricate mountains, where it commanded a northern view of the Spitwater River, lay the village which Annum called home. This was Little Triple, so-called because families with three different surnames had converged there. A backwater intensely remote, it suffered the brunt of long and bitter winters which kept the mountain path leading to it a very lonely road indeed.

In Little Triple, as anywhere else, a crimson sun shed its greetings every morning and bid adieu at night, but, in an uncanny resemblance to the males of the village, it failed to achieve any more than a symbolic existence. Only at the height of summer did this sun actually provide any warmth, petering out after just a few short days to revert to its usual winter torpor. The men themselves, already a strikingly rare commodity in the village, equally lacked the capacity to generate heat. Apathetic, enervated, destitute of both cruelty and kindness, they passed their days in apparent contemplation of the surrounding mountains. However, absorbed in thoughtful observation they clearly were not, for their eyes revealed an emptiness of intent, like pools of dead water, dull and lusterless. During that short spate of summer heat they would sit in twos and threes scrunched up against the sides of their houses, arms folded, mouths agape, offering their wrinkled faces to

the mountain breeze. Winter would find them sitting cross-legged on their heated brick beds, roasting those implements particular to their crotches and puffing, ever puffing, on their pipes. It was thus that every household in Little Triple boasted a capaciously built heated brick bed, each one differing from the other only by whether or not its surface was spread with rush mats. These *kangs*, as they were called, remained fired up the year round, even at the height of summer when people would ply them with bundles of straw to dissipate the dampness.

The men here aged very quickly. By the time they were thirty they looked as if they already had one foot in the grave.

There is an old adage that says: "He who goes to Little Triple can kiss his hard-ons goodbye." The "hard-on", of course, refers to a condition of the male implement. But in actuality, this condition — or rather the lack of it — didn't necessarily have anything to do with the dampness. It's that there was something wrong with the drinking water. It had a kind of a bluish tinge to it. From somewhere deep in the mountain it came trickling out like dribbling saliva to flow languidly, sluggishly, past the village and onward to no one knew where. Clearly, there was something sinister in its pleasantly sweet taste, for watered on it even the local animal population became indifferent to the rites of spring. Wild animals very seldom came to patronize the waters of this village and its environs, and thus it was that the people of Little Triple had lived in peace for many generations. This safe and secure existence exacted a price, however, and that was that feminine seductiveness failed to arouse interest

in the men; indeed, the greater her charms, the less they could care. In summer, quiescence enveloped the village as they dozed indolently or moved about in lassitude, somnambulant, like lost spirits adrift in the ether. No one even suspected that it was the water that had dissolved their masculinity.

Any wayfarer seized with the desire to enter the village had to cross a bridge, which was known as the "Bridge of passion". This bridge had a lot of character. The local stone that had gone into its construction lent it an imposing air, and its overall design was reminiscent of that consequential bridge in yan'an, except that it only had three arches in keeping with the narrowness of the river. Nearly all the young men of Little Triple, upon reaching the age of twenty, would cross over this bridge to go out and seek their fortunes in the world. The passage of a hundred years had transformed this practice into a custom, which in turn had further developed a peculiar permutation: Before setting out on his quest, a young man had to marry. In fact, unmarried men were absolutely forbidden to leave the village. Under the influence of their newly wedded bliss, these young chaps could wield their virility according to expectations and so naturally were able to deposit some "seed". But after a few months, like fragile plants hit by frost, their masculinity wilted, triggering the inevitable decline into that all-too-familiar state of entropy. Shame replaced their bliss, penetrating their very souls, daily intensifying their torment, until departure from the village became their obsessive desire. Prevailing upon them to remain would simply doom them to ruination and uselessness, and so their loved ones let them go. (A few congenital defectives were the

only exceptions.) To the accompaniment of weeping and wailing, each and every one would cross that bridge under the frail light of the silver of a new moon. What was behind the mandate that their leave-taking occur under a new moon? To tell the truth, no one ever had the faintest idea.

Having gone abroad, these men discovered that it was as difficult as ever to scratch out a living, that the new place was really no improvement over what they had left behind. But it would invariably have one advantage that home did not, and that was the water. In a few short months, the men of Little Triple would find their potency restored and their designations as men vindicated. And so, convinced that Little Triple lay in an inauspicious geomantic position, they never went home again. Meanwhile, the grass widows of Little Triple found a good use for that barren hill at the western end of the Bridge of Passion: They turned it into a cemetery, a cemetery comprised of unfilled graves. Each in her turn would mound up the earth into the accustomed shape, then when the pangs of longing would become unbearable, she would take up her offerings and go to cry before the "grave". "Oh, how I miss you..." she would sob. Here these unfilled graves proliferated, stretching out in an unbroken line, constructed one by one by generations of bereaved women. These women would live as widows for ten years, twenty years, even until the last day of their natural lives, and then have their old bones interred in their husbands' unfilled graves.

On hot summer days, when an incandescent sun hung high in a sea of shimmering blue, the Bridge of Passion in the valley below stood resplendent in its

greatest glory. On either bank flowers and trees tossing in the breeze like gorgeous whirling, dancing dragons enhanced its splendour. Seized with the sight's breathtaking aspect, approaching visitors, espying it from afar, would plunge forward with a new sense of urgency.

Whenever a man from the outside world would set foot on the bridge, the women beating their laundry on the opposite bank would note the event with a shout of laughter: "Look! Look!" they would exclaim, "Here comes somebody's father!" Indeed, any man who made his way to this place would find himself virtually imprisoned until he had deposited some "seed". There was no question of immorality in this practice as it had long achieved the status of a custom. By the time he would be allowed to leave, he would present an aspect exactly like that of the contemporary Chinese writer Lu Xun's "dregs": unsteady of step, staggering with weakness. To look upon him was to start one's eyes stinging with tears. Some did not survive the experience, and these would be buried in bleak graves marked with headstones that noted their names and where they came from. Here wildflowers would grow profusely. On Qingming Festival,* women would emerge from the village in threes and fours, leading their children across the crisp, snowy crust to the graveyard. Here they would examine the graves, sweep them, repair them, offer sacrifices, and heat wine and burn paper to supply the departed spirit with drink and money. They would murmur, they would wail, and they would not go home until the sun had set.

*A memorial day for the dead in early April.