

Selected and Translated
by *Harry J. Huang*



AN ANTHOLOGY OF CHINESE SHORT SHORT STORIES



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“Title of the story”

By [Chinese author’s name]

Translated by Harry J. Huang

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and Wendy Huang

Preface

The Chinese short short story, or mini-story, is no longer a dwarf. In China, it has become an equal member in the family of fiction. According to Liu Haitao, one of the contributors of this anthology, ancient Chinese short short story writing reached its peak in the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368–1911). However, the Chinese short short story did not gain official recognition until the 1990s, as pointed out by Yang Xiaomin, another contributor and Editor-in-Chief of the Chinese monthly *Selected Chinese Short Short Stories*. Last year, more than 400 books of Chinese short short stories were published. More significantly, short short stories have been included in university and college textbooks. Nonetheless, the Chinese short short story is hardly known to the reader in the English-speaking world.

With the intention to introduce the Chinese short short story to the English reader, I have translated 121 such literary pieces, including ten ancient ones, which thus comprise this anthology. These stories were selected from a pool of more than 20,000. What should be pointed out is that the ten ancient stories are not intended to represent the different periods or writers of various dynasties, but merely as a glimpse at this form of narrative literature in ancient China.

Submissions and Selections

Every effort was made to produce a best possible anthology. My call for submission was published in the *New Star Chinese Weekly* and on its web site, and was spread by the delegation of the Chinese Writers' Association who visited Canada three years ago, the Short Short Story Writers' Society of China, and several provincial writers' associations in China. Writers also recommended peers. In addition, I selected authors directly from selections of award win-

ning stories. Authors were citizens or permanent residents of the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Macao, at the time their stories were published.

The average length of the short short stories is about 1,500 Chinese characters, approximately translated into 900 English words. "Coming to Life," the shortest story, consists of 91 Chinese characters. A few pieces, such as "My Wife's Hands," exceed 2,000 Chinese characters.

I attempted to find stories that demonstrate some Chinese culture which readers at different levels may enjoy. I would feel honored if each story could impact the readers in some way: either thrill them, amuse them, enlighten them, make them smile, laugh or cry, weigh them with sadness, arouse curiosity, strike a chord in their heart, or impress them with unforgettable artistry.

The anthology is divided into sections by theme for easy reference. Also included are seven essays on the Chinese short short story and brief biographies of the authors.

It is my hope that another edition or anthology will be published to include best new Chinese short short stories. Writers and readers are invited to recommend stories in Chinese by e-mail to harry8899@yahoo.com.

Rules of Translation

The reader is my boss whose expectations have become my guideline. I conducted two surveys to find out what readers look for in a translation. Three translations of Cao Xueqing's poem "*Hao liao ge*" done by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, David Hawkes, and myself (with our names removed) and two versions of Cui Hao's *Huang he lou* done by myself (with my name removed) were respectively given to 102 and 50 Canadian college students to grade. The students were then asked to explain why a certain grade was given and/or why they preferred one version over the other. The results indicate that 56% preferred one version to another for its clarity and

understandability; 13% stressed the importance of content; 31% listed stylistics as a priority. They said that they liked a translation when it was “clear” and “easy to understand” with “good content” and “elegant style.” I heeded their words and did whatever I could for the readers on behalf of the authors.

Knowing readers from diverse cultures with individual tastes look for different merits in a translation, I opt for readability. An English-speaking audience with high-school education remains my primary target. Thus, throughout the process of translation, additional notes would be added if any point was deemed difficult for the reader. Any repetitive words and sentences that should be combined or simplified would be treated with due attention.

Before the translation started, every contemporary story was reviewed and, where necessary, edited, in some cases substantially, by the Chinese author or the translator with the authorization of the writer. The translation was not done word for word or line for line. Taken as a whole, every story was recreated in English, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, with the aim to render every Chinese character. The English text may not fully match the original text if compared line by line. The ancient Chinese short short stories, which are often deemed untranslatable, were translated in a more unconventional manner, simply based upon my paraphrasing of the outdated text. In my view, only in this way can ancient Chinese literature be translated into readable English. I hold the opinion that a translation not only should be faithful to the original, but also as good in the target language as it is in the source language. For details of this criterion, see my essay “FRB Translation Criterion & COSB Model for Translation Quality Analysis & Evaluation: Illustrated with Poems Translated from Chinese” in *Chinese Translators’ Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2004.

From start (“Invisible Label”) to finish (“What Scares the General”), it took me twenty years to complete this anthology. With the generosity of the Chinese authors, I am adding to the literary

flowerbed a fresh flower to beautify the reader's life. May this new flower never wither and fall!

Acknowledgments

First of all, I wish to express my sincere thanks to all the authors who responded to the call for submission to this anthology. I owe a debt of gratitude to all the living authors who have granted me the exclusive right to translate their stories into English as well as their understanding and support.

Special thanks go to Dr. Robert Price, professor of English; Dr. Lien Chao; Professors Lynn Holmes and Elizabeth Holmes; Dr. Stephanie Fysh; Patria C. Rivera; Professor Patricia Reeves; and Ms. Chen Haiyan, director of the Panda Books Department of Foreign Languages Press, for their invaluable editorial input; to Mr. Gao Weixi and Dr. Mark Moss, for their advice on various issues; and to Ms. Li Fang, Ms. Wang Rui, the other staff members, the Editor-in-Chief and the Director of Foreign Languages Press, for their consistent support.

Thanks also go to the Chinese Writers' Association, the Short Short Story Writers' Society of China, *New Star Chinese Weekly* in Toronto, and Seneca College.

The following individuals deserve my heartfelt thanks for contacting the many authors whose addresses were originally unknown to me: Mr. Jiang Zilong, vice-chairman of the Chinese Writers' Association; Mr. Ling Dingnian; Ms. Cai Qing; Mr. Sun Fangyou; Mr. Zha La Ga Hu, Mr. Ma Baoshan; Mr. Lin Ruqiu; Mr. He Baiyuan; Mr. Tao Ran; Ms. Huei-Wen Vivian Chung of National Sun Yat-sen University in Taiwan; and numerous other friends and readers.

I also wish to thank my wife for helping me understand the Cantonese slang and other difficult points, my elder daughter Wendy Huang, for reading every one of the stories and making extremely useful comments, and also my five-year-old daughter, Alice, and two-year-old son, Jeffrey, who have sacrificed much playtime with me

for the sake of this book.

It is the unreserved help of all these individuals that has enabled me to crystallize for the English reader in book form the artistry of Chinese short short story writers.

Harry J. Huang
Toronto, Canada

My Views on the Chinese Short Short Story

What a short short story does, often in a more attractive and direct way, is what a lyric poem is designed to do: it gives a direct perception of an event, or a feeling, a situation, a character, an interaction. However, it is given without the historical or cultural context in which the perception is embedded. Or almost: there may be allusions or hints, and if the reader misses them, the point of the story is lost, or the story may be misread. That is why it is especially difficult to translate a short short story, or to deal with one from even a few decades in the past, or from a neighboring country (or community). Many or all of the historical or cultural conditions cannot be provided or explained — the author may not even be consciously aware of them. The annotations and footnotes needed would be endless, which would swamp the story itself.

Here, the tact and skill of the translator Harry Huang deserve our gratitude. He provides just enough illumination, without obliterating the storyteller's reticence, limiting and controlling the information the story gives: the rhetorical strategies employed. Why would we want to read the stories, if the teller did not control, withhold, position the elements in a skilful way?

Our interest, of course, may be just as much in the aspects not foregrounded by the storytellers: the histories and lives of the contemporary Chinese writers Mr. Huang has selected, and the characters they present. (How representative are they, and how can we tell?) We are curious, inquisitive, often reading with a meddling scrutiny, not always with the best of intentions. Often we lack the patience required to read the stories appropriately or do not expect to enjoy the stories anyway. But what we have in Mr. Huang's an-

thology is not a duty-read, not something we have an obligation to understand.

First, there are enough stories here to inform us of what is behind Chinese storytelling, the purpose if there is one: the expectation that each story will have a moral, a point, a positive value in our own lives or community. What may appear to us at times as old fashioned, a remnant of (or possibly an unconscious throwback to) the didactic monitory devices of older political regimes are really traces of a much older tradition. Literature that teaches, guides, instructs, improves (in our own schools, and not so long ago), that makes us more civilized, more sensitive to others, or just better informed about everything has been part of our tradition for thousands of years.

If such didacticism or moralizing is out of fashion in our modernist and postmodernist times, that does not mean readers have completely lost their taste for it, and the pendulum may swing back. Reading that challenges our moral and ethical values can open our minds and reinforce our prejudices. Stories (such as many in this selection) which may strike us as partisan, as special pleading, or express a self interest without nuance or balance or awareness of counter arguments can still be effective and stimulating, as prods to our complacency, and fixed ideas.

So much for moralizing: it is best to read short short stories the way we listen to anecdotes and jokes: moments of uncensored privilege when we find ourselves outside the “politically correct” framework of our everyday lives — almost in a dream-world where taboos can no longer apply: licensed irresponsibility.

In our carefully controlled and self-monitored transactions with others in a multicultural society, we wander in a fog, encountering other people as opaque, well-meaning, but enigmatic, seemingly unknowable. If fiction (serious fiction at least) is designed to give us imaginative access to other selves, and since to be human is necessarily to suffer and to face the unpleasant, what we gain from our reading is an extra concentrated dose of simulated life.

What do we want from life, from other people? We choose to escape from them, to go to another country and reinvent ourselves, which may be the point of Harry Huang's "Should I Stay or Go." We choose to seek revenge on those we have lived with, or at least tell the Truth about them; to memorialize the weird, inexplicable, often senseless things that do happen, or the very odd things people can think. We choose just to enjoy and marvel at the patterns, coincidences, juxtapositions of characters, what happens to them, and what it might mean; to celebrate the endurance, nobility, pathos of life at a minimal level: lost in a desert, condemned to death, offered as a sacrifice for the good of the community, committed to duty such as keeping the furnace stoked with coal. These things sustain us.

And what of the new, young Chinese writers? From the stories in Mr. Huang's anthology what I see are the survival of naïve romance, men chasing women, women choosing not to be dominated by men, families still more important than the community at large, the need for release through humor and wild behavior, economic uncertainty and recognition that some aspects of the recent past are just fading away. The problems facing rural communities as employment disappears are hinted at in some of the stories; the new explosion of urban life is cautiously celebrated without as much apprehension as one would expect. The short short story offers little scope for deeper examination of where society is heading, but what literature does? There is less science fiction, less fantasy writing here than one would expect (but certainly enough to my taste), and perhaps less exploratory, adventuresome imagination of psychological possibilities than there should be. Maybe that is what we will see if collections such as this appear in the future.

Lynn Holmes

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