

# THE SWALLOW

祁寿华  
Shouhua Qi

Musings on Cross-Cultural  
Experience and (Mis)Understanding

## 飞越 太平洋的 燕子

旅美人生、感悟、思考  
英语散文集



上海外语教育出版社  
Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press

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## 图书在版编目(CIP)数据

飞越太平洋的燕子: 旅美人生、感悟、思考英语散文集 / 祁寿华著.

—上海: 上海外语教育出版社, 2003

ISBN 7-81080-638-6

I. 飞… II. 祁… III. 散文-作品集-中国-当代-英文 IV. I267

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2002)第 092738 号

**出版发行: 上海外语教育出版社**

(上海外国语大学内) 邮编: 200083

电 话: 021-65425300 (总机), 35051812 (发行部)

电子邮箱: bookinfo@sflep.com.cn

网 址: <http://www.sflep.com.cn> <http://www.sflep.com>

责任编辑: 吴文子

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印 刷: 常熟市华顺印刷有限公司

经 销: 新华书店上海发行所

开 本: 880×1230 1/32 印张 7.625 字数 188 千字

版 次: 2003 年 3 月第 1 版 2003 年 3 月第 1 次印刷

印 数: 5 000 册

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书 号: ISBN 7-81080-638-6 / G · 325

定 价: 13.50 元

本版图书如有印装质量问题, 可向本社调换



## 序

1989年春,我像一只孤燕,飞到了太平洋的彼岸,在那里求学、谋生、开拓事业。须臾间,十多年的光阴已经与我擦身而过。其间,有说不清的千种感受,理了又乱的万般思绪,这些感受和思绪渐渐变成英语文字,以客座专栏、评论、随笔和短篇小说等形式发表在美国的报纸、期刊上,受到读者们的欢迎。

现在与您见面的这本集子中的大部分篇目发表于1996年至2000年间,曾被收入 *Bridging the Pacific* 一书中,于2000年在美国出版。“To Rekindle a Love Affair”是2001年11月才发表的,而“I Like It Hot”则是2002年春的新作。另外,本集中的一些篇目曾改译成中文,见诸我的集子《超越太平洋》(1999年秋,河南人民出版社),特作说明。

鉴于几乎所有文稿都是在另一个国度、另一种文化环境里为另一类读者群写的,有些视角、观点难免失之偏颇;走笔中涉及当今美国政治、社会和文化生活中特有现象、事端及人物之处,虽加以注释,也难免有不详尽之处,特此致歉。在文笔风格上,我追求洒脱畅达,亦庄亦谐,是得是失,读者是最好的裁判。

愿拙作能给读者认识中美文化的异同带来有益的启迪,也希望它对如何用英语在国际环境里有效地交流、促进不同文化群体间的理解和认识提供一些启示。

上海外语教育出版社社长庄智象先生阅读了拙著之后热心



促成其与国内读者的见面,责任编辑吴文子先生为本集的筹划设计、修改润色等投入高质量的工作,特此致谢。

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## *The Swallow*

A bulky blue canvas bag in each hand, and a bulging greenish nylon handbag vised precariously under my right arm, I struggled out of the sliding door of Terminal 1 at O'Hare International Airport. The handbag strap was already broken, a little inconvenience that had happened at the crowded Shanghai International Airport over 20 hours earlier. Every single joint from my shoulders down to my fingertips was being stretched to its utmost limits. My 5'5" stature shrank a couple of inches under the burden.

The gusty, freezing waves of Lake Michigan wind caught me as I exited the terminal. The warm moisture on the thick lenses above my nose instantly froze into something resembling the fine sugar coating on a Dunkin' Donut.

A huge shadow penetrated the fog.

"L'me len' cha a 'and?" offered the shadow in a deep, throaty voice. Before I could respond, my left hand felt a yank, and a sudden loss of weight. I became unbalanced, teetering uncontrollably in a rightward orientation. Switching the handbag to my now freed left hand to regain balance, I labored after the bearish outline across the busy driveway toward what seemed a bus stop sign on the narrow pedestrian island.

"Thank you very much!" I gasped when I had finally caught up with my as-yet-unintroduced new friend, each syl-



lable bouncing off my almost frozen mouth into the cold air like a fugitive being hunted down by a tail of overly zealous hot steam. I removed my glasses and wiped them roughly with the handkerchief that had been abused a thousand times to dry the torrential sweat from my forehead. In the now somewhat-less-foggy view, a pair of big, shining eyes appeared. In those eyes, black was purely black and white was purely white. They stared down at me hungrily.

I was aware of the need to express my gratitude more than verbally. I dug frantically in the nylon handbag for my wallet. Then, I stopped in the wake of a sudden realization. Cold sweat graced my forehead again.

"Don't y' wanna tip?" my new friend urged, noticing my hesitation. I mumbled an apology. Throwing me a dirty look, the erstwhile friend hurried away to help other passengers who were currently being spit out of the sliding door.

Multi-lanes. Overpasses. Cars. Yellow Cabs. Limos. Buses. Shuttles. White snow. Muddy snow. Hazy street lights.

Where is my Swallow? The spring dream and sweet melody dancing in and out of my country house?

*No borrowing of your charcoal,  
no borrowing of your rice,  
only borrowing your house to give birth to our babies.*

My father used to tell me that this was what the swallows were singing to us every springtime when they returned, asking for permission to build their new nests in the roof beams of our house.





I had become infatuated with the name of the shuttle bus service the first time I saw it in the schedule book sent by my thoughtful foreign student advisor. I'd rolled it over on my tongue a hundred times and every time, I savored the same sweet, childhood memories.

Five minutes passed. Ten minutes passed. Buses came and went. No Swallows. The back of my shirt was frozen stiff with what had once been sweat. My nose, mouth and hands were approaching numbness.

Then, I saw a bus, with the well-known name on its forehead. It pulled up gracefully. My heart beat wildly as it had on a certain spring afternoon nine years before when I saw a beautiful girl, now my wife, walking towards me along a little path of the Xuanwu Lake right across from the new railway station. We were going out on a first date.

The spring dream. The sweet melody—

A stout guy in a short-sleeved uniform interrupted my reveries as he dismounted the big bird energetically. He looked strong and warm, oblivious to the below zero temperature. While he was opening up the luggage trunk, I hastened over.

"Are you going to Bloomington-Normal, sir?" my mouth, now frozen out of shape, managed. My whole body shivered. The cold, however, was quickly succumbing to a sickening urge to visit a restroom.

"Yep!" Short as the answer was, it had to be squeezed out through pinkish gum that had been twisted and chewed God knows how many times between crushing teeth.

I hastened back, dragging the two heavy bags closer to the Swallow. As I turned them over to the warm-looking driver, I



sighed. I felt a great sense of relief and accomplishment.

As I was mounting the bird, my glasses were once again overcome by a fog. This time, the moisture was due to the waves of heat coming from inside the bus. After wiping off the moisture with my trusty handkerchief, I bent down to fumble inside the handbag with its broken strap. I succeeded in digging out all of my money: a \$ 100 bill. It was hidden in the bundle comprised of my passport, the IAP 66 form, my admission notice and letters from the foreign student advisor and director of graduate studies.

This bundle was further buried deep in rubber-soled cloth shoes, homemade diapers, tiny, cute, and fluffy baby clothes, sent by a mother for her daughter who was due at any time. The mother was a friend of my in-laws and the daughter's husband was a doctoral student at Champaign-Urbana.

The admission notice would entitle me to a \$ 10 discount for this ride. So the total cost would come down to \$ 20. Not bad, considering the 130 miles distance—and, of course, the snow.

I handed the \$ 100 bill to the driver with the admission notice. His chewing muscles were still wriggling methodically in his warm and ruddy cheeks.

"What's de's?" the driver exclaimed, spitting whatever was left of the tasteless gum into something next to his seat. He gave a swift, backward glance at the whole bus. "Think I'm some kinda Donald Trump\* walkin' 'round w' bundles o'

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\* Donald John Trump (1946—), multibillionaire American real estate developer, who flirted with the idea of running for the presidency as an independent (as opposed to running as either a Republican or a Democrat) in the 2000 election.



bills, eh!" He thrust the currency and the admission notice back to me. His face glowered with indignation, giving his face an even healthier look.

I was dumbfounded. However naive I am, I have never bought into the myth of gold-paved streets in America, but a \$ 100 bill? I turned to the passengers in the bus. Some were already dozing off into their own, unknown dreamlands, others stared ahead, blankly.

Suddenly, I saw another face: the expressionless face of a pretty girl sitting behind the glass window of a branch office of the Central Bank in downtown Nanjing, my hometown. I had taken the afternoon off and biked all the way to that office to prevent this very scenario from taking place.

There were several windows. I couldn't be sure now whether I had made my choice because the line there was shorter or because the teller was younger and prettier. At any rate, after waiting in the line for quite some time, I approached her majestic-looking window and asked this young, pretty teller to change the \$ 100 bill.

I had obtained the \$ 100 bill through an earlier, clandestine exchange with David in a dimly-lit back room of a small family restaurant. David, son of a mayor of a small town in California, was then studying at Nanjing University. He and his buddies liked to frequent such restaurants to satisfy their taste for Hot 'n Sour Tofu, Princess Chicken and other exotic dishes. Occasionally, they would slip into the back rooms to gratify other desires of theirs: higher exchange rate for their American dollars. Having become savvy about how things were done locally, they found it difficult to resist the tempta-



tion of a vibrant black market which beckoned them with an exchange rate typically three times higher than that offered by the state-run Central Bank. For me, however, it was the most thrilling and illicit adventure I had ever taken. It was as if I had gone behind my wife's back to see a woman of questionable reputation.

"No," the pretty bank teller said in a flat voice, throwing the bill back to me through the tiny hole in her teller window.

"Listen. Please would you change this bill?" The veneer of pride, that came from being a lecturer of English at a prestigious university, began to peel off. "I *need* the smaller bills. I'm traveling abroad, and I'm sure it will be ... um ... inconvenient to—"

"How can I tell if that bill of yours is real?" She cut me off, raising her voice to a higher pitch. A flash of emotion flitted across her pretty face.

"Well, you have a well-trained eye. I'm sure that if it was counterfeit, you would be able to tell right away." I held on, unwilling to give up my only hope.

"Nuisance!" she cut me short, again, utterly losing her patience. Her face had more color now, making it even more lovely. "Next!" she shouted to the person behind me, who eagerly elbowed me to the side.

That was the last straw. All the humiliations I had had to put up with so far during the last few months of my efforts to overcome each of the numerous obstacles, from known and unknown directions, had come to a head and finally found their target for retaliation.



The worst of these humiliations had been at the hands of university officials. When I went to the University's Office of International Affairs to get its seal on my application for permission to study abroad, the division Party chief-turned-director was sitting behind his big desk, busy signing forms. Having heard the purpose of my visit, he began to lecture me, without raising his rather fleshy face: "All you young teachers care about is going abroad, fooling around for a few years, then dragging back home a few foreign-made TV sets, fridges, washer-dryers, microwaves ... For what? To show off! I've got you all figured out. No sour grapes from yours truly here, 'cause who hasn't seen them foreign things ..."

I nearly choked. Speechless. I had never met this guy before, and I felt his sermon was totally uncalled for. I quickly let my emotions get the better of me, and rose up in my own defense. A few minutes later, I stormed out of his office, feeling rather good about myself, but empty-handed.

Then, there was the University's head accountant who moaned and groaned through his nose after practically making me beg for the quota of foreign currency, i. e., U.S. dollars, I was entitled to exchange per university policies. I needed the money to buy the ticket for my flight.

After taking several deep drags at his cigarette which had burned almost to the butt, he offered me the black market rate, with apparent reluctance in his voice. I was told later that the results might have been more encouraging if I had approached both of these university officials differently, e. g., with cartons of Kent, 555, Marlboro, etc.

And now, here was the unfortunate who would pay for



all the indignities. I would have spit all over her with the most obscene words on earth, but being brought up by strict parents, I hadn't ever truly mastered that art in my native tongue. I had a whole heart to ditch the Confucian "Gentleman uses his mouth rather than his fists" code and smash that cute little nose in her lovely face. Alas, my arm was not long enough, and the thick window glass was intimidating and seemingly impenetrable enough to discourage these thoughts.

All the literary prowess I had imagined myself to be in possession of—critiques published in academic journals, books translated, near perfect TOEFL score, impressive GRE percentile, all of the things that had earned me the graduate school admission and teaching assistantship—all of this proved useless to me now.

As I was turning away, foaming with anger, an English expression suddenly jumped to the tip of my tongue. "Damn you!" I fired. That would do the job here.

I missed the target miserably. Her pretty face was still intact with no smoking holes or crushed bone from the verbal gunshot. Apparently, her ignorance of the lethality of that outburst was her best armor. Nevertheless, I experienced the same sensation that Ah Q—the twisted protagonist in the famous Lu Xun novella—got from touching the smooth, hairless top of a young nun's head. I felt a deep, yet fleeting, satisfaction that comes from exacting revenge.

"Next!" the now-gumless driver of the Swallow Shuttle bellowed.

"What should I do, sir?" I woke up from the reverie and moved to the side to let others pay their fare. Maybe I should



use that same lethal weapon to take care of the predicament here ... No, I didn't have the guts to pull the trigger.

"L'cha know later, okay?" the driver was more than annoyed now. Somehow I had become the object of his utter irritation. Had he placed the blame on me for the tastelessness of his treasured gum also?

The bus began to move. Staring outside from my seat, I could have sworn I saw a recognizable, pretty face, sneering at me from behind the thick glass window. Damn.

When the bus stopped at another terminal, the driver turned to me. "See de guy in a re' hat o'er d're? Hurry it up!"

I huffed it towards the aforementioned red-hatted, Santa-looking fellow. He sat perched inside a glass structure near a sliding door. In his hand, he held an enormous money-holder. Before I could make any explanation, my savior took the \$ 100 bill and gave me some \$ 20's, \$ 10's, and \$ 5's. I hurried back to the Swallow, pulled out one \$ 20 bill, and handed it over to the driver. Success! I felt like saying, "Take that, Gum-chewer!" But once again, I refrained.

The bus finally pulled away from the airport terminals now. First Interstate 295, then to Interstate 55. Flat, snow-covered land stretched into the endless unknown and eventually merged with the misty, somber sky.

More than 15 hours of flying over the Pacific. Another 4 hours over North America. Across 10 time zones. Ten thousand miles away from home. Meiguo, the Beautiful Country, remained as bewildering in direct contact as in the book I once co-translated: *America Through a Kaleidoscope*.



Why was I coming to America? I wondered. To borrow charcoal? Rice? To look for gold? To satisfy the expectations I had felt in the eyes of my wife and family? To keep my place as one of the most promising young scholars in the foreign languages department? To pacify something in me which had hitherto been dormant, but had suddenly become restless? Or was it to answer a calling I had heard only vaguely? I couldn't tell, and I didn't want to be bothered by these questions now.

The Swallow sailed gleefully down the interstate. Perhaps my overactive imagination was getting the better of me, but the bus seemed to flit and dance onto and off the highway to drop off old passengers and pick up new ones at small towns. All of the passengers would be plunged into freezing cold when the door opened. We would finally recover long after the door was shut.

After about 2 and a half hours, the Swallow made a stop in front of a fast food restaurant in Pontiac, a small town 35 miles north of Bloomington-Normal.

"Y' folks can get off 'n' use de restroom." The shirt-sleeved driver sounded warm and thoughtful. I noticed that he had set to work on another piece of gum with obvious relish.

Feeling the bursting pressure in my bladder, I eagerly followed the single file line off the bus.

There were more than half a dozen guys crowded into the small single-toilet restroom of the fast food restaurant. Every one of them seemed to be taking his time deliberately, thoroughly enjoying the long-awaited act of relief. The air





grew more and more repugnant. Of course, I was the last one out of the restroom.

My heart skipped a beat. Where was my Swallow? I rushed to the spot where the bus had been. It wasn't there. I rushed to the back of the restaurant, staggering over a thickly glaciated little path. All I saw were icicles, hanging from the eaves. I rushed to the Clark gas station next to the restaurant. A middle-aged, balding employee there told me that the bus had just taken off ten seconds before.

Everything I had was on that bus: the two heavy bags in the luggage compartment, the bulging handbag underneath the seat, the \$ 80 in small bills, my personal documents, the homemade shoes, diapers and fluffy baby clothes. Everything was on that bus, everything but me.

"What do I do? What should I do?" I asked in a panicky voice, half to myself and half to the gas station employee. I felt a sickening urge to use the restroom, though I had just been there. The cold winds from across Lake Michigan were mercilessly whipping at me now.

The balding employee was sympathetic. He dug into his pockets, produced a handful of quarters, dimes and nickels, and pushed them to me across the glass countertop. "Try th' pay phone ou' there 'n' probably ..."

As one being sucked into a freezing whirlpool while clutching at a straw, I grabbed the coins and hurried to the phone. It stood right next to a "NO EXIT" sign, near the station entrance.

No matter how hard I ransacked my memory, I couldn't turn up any numbers. The massive, worn-out phone book