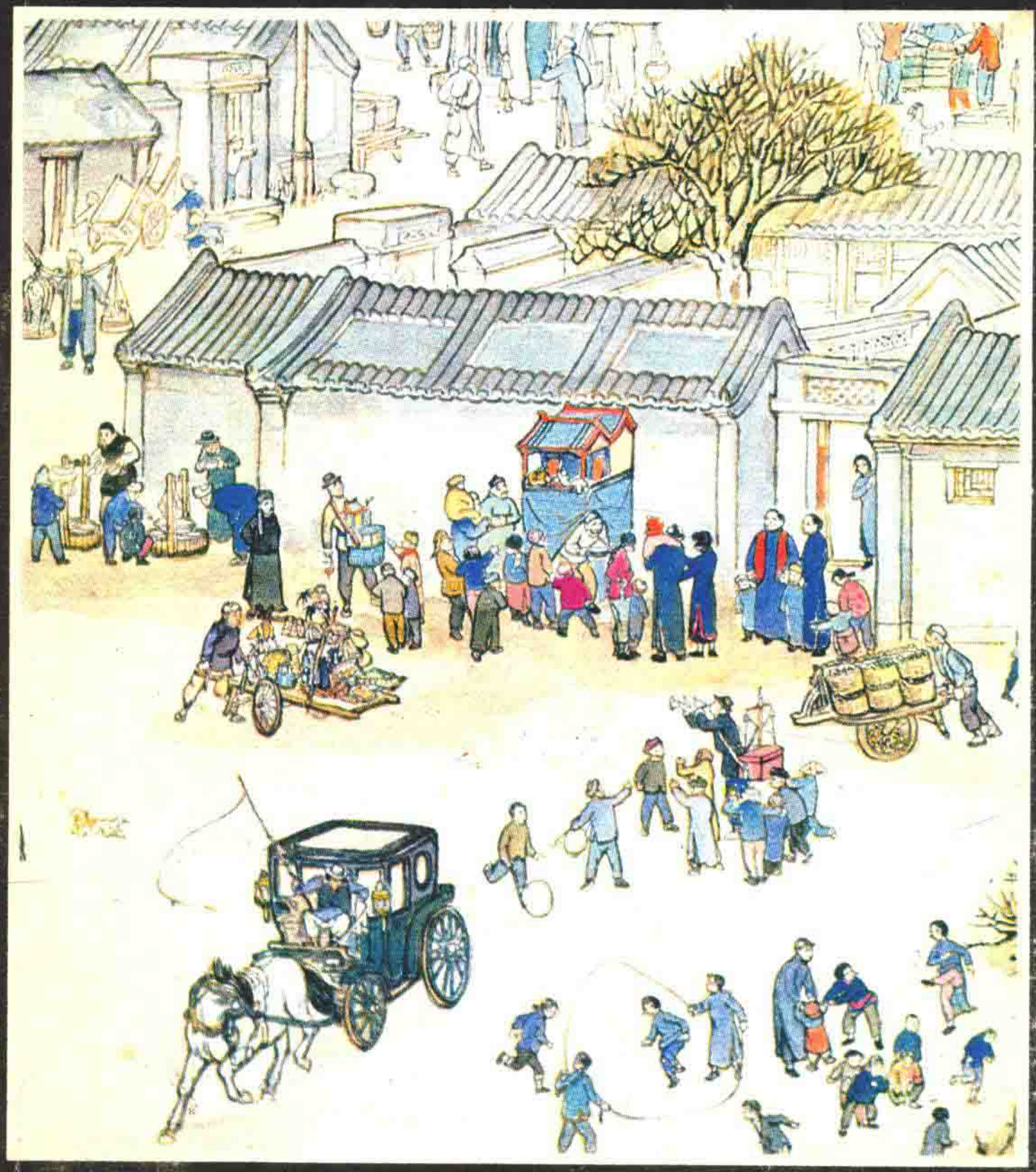
XIAO QIAN

CHESTNUTS AND OTHER STORIES



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Xiao Qian was born in Beijing in 1910. His father, a Mongolian whose family had settled in Beijing, died shortly before his birth, and his mother, a Han woman, was obliged to seek shelter for herself and her child with her husband's family. A chequered education included part-time work in a rug factory and in a dairy to cover his tuition fees, and was followed by temporary work as a publisher's assistant and as a teacher. Xiao Qian's career as a writer began in 1933 with the publication of his short stories in Beijing journals. After graduating in journalism from Yanjing University in 1935, he worked as literary editor and roving correspondent for *Ta Kong Pao* in Tianjin, Shanghai and Hong Kong. In 1939 he went to England with the post of lecturer in Chinese at the School of Oriental Studies at the University of London, at the same time working part-time for *Ta Kong Pao* as its London correspondent. In 1942 he moved to King's College, Cambridge, for post-graduate study in English literature. He resumed his career as a journalist in 1944 to cover the Western Front for *Ta Kong Pao*, and travelled extensively in Europe at this time. He returned to China at the conclusion of the war to teach at Fudan University in Shanghai; in 1946-1949 he was also a leader writer on

foreign affairs for the Shanghai *Ta Kong Pao*. He worked for *Ta Kong Pao* in Hong Kong in 1948, but returned to Beijing in 1949 as deputy editor-in-chief of the English-language *People's China*. In 1953 he became deputy director of *Literature in Translation*, and from 1956 to 1958 was deputy editor-in-chief at *Literary Gazette*, China's leading theoretical organ on literature and the arts. Since 1961, he has been an editor at People's Literature Press. Apart from two spells in the countryside during the "anti-Rightist" campaign and the "cultural revolution", he has lived in Beijing with his wife and children since 1949. Since 1978 his fiction and journalism have reappeared in several different editions from publishers all over China. Among his translations are Chinese versions of *The Good Soldier Schweik*, *The History of Jonathan Wild the Great*, Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* and *Satirical Essays by Stephen Leacock*. His translation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* was performed with great success in Beijing in 1983, and was later shown on national television. Among his works written in English are *Etchings of a Tormented Age* (1942), *The Dragon Beards Versus the Blueprints* (1944) and *How the Tillers Won Back Their Land* (1955), plus his own translations of his early short stories, *The Spinners of Silk* (1944).

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Preface

IN many ways Xiao Qian is particularly well-qualified to introduce China to Western readers. Educated in a foreign missionary school in China, he later spent many years abroad, mostly in England, as a news correspondent, teacher of Chinese and keen student of English literature. At the same time, his knowledge and appreciation of traditional China are profound, and he has been both a participant in and recorder of the revolutionary changes that have transformed his country into a modern nation.

Most of these stories were first published in English translation by the author himself in 1944 under the title *The Spinners of Silk*. The British press praised the collection for its lyric yet realistic portrayal of Beijing life in the 1920s and 1930s. Several reviewers singled out for special praise the stories about childen. The present selection reprints all the stories about children in the original collection, together with an additional three on the same theme, also from the 1930s, and a long reminiscence on the author's childhood, written in 1980.

Of particular interest to Western readers is the story "Cactus Flower", which reveals the destructive influence of missionary Christianity on Chinese family and national life in the early twentieth century. Xiao Qian was perhaps the first Chinese writer to deal with the effects of the Christian church in China, and several of

his early stories are on this topic. His maiden work, "The Spinners of Silk"* (1933), is both a love story and a parable of the helplessness of any deity in the face of China's then terrible cycles of drought, flood and famine. Another early story, "The Conversion", shows both "rice-bowl" Christians and romantic youngsters succumbing to the recruitment methods of the Salvation Army. First translated for Edgar Snow's famous anthology *Living China*, "Conversion"* attracted more attention than any other story from contemporary reviewers, and has become a standard anthology piece.

"The Captive" and "Shandong Deng" are affectionate evocations of traditional Chinese folk arts and festivals. In turn they are balanced by stories like "When Your Eaves Are Low", "A Rainy Evening" and "Under the Fence", which describe the unhealthier aspects of traditional Chinese feudal culture barely hinted at in "The Captive". "The Philatelist" shows a child's awakening to the harsh reality of Japanese aggression in north China; "Chestnuts" is on a similar subject, as perceived through an older but more immature mind. "Galloping Legs" is the one story in this selection not related from a child's or young man's perspective. In describing the tragic fate of the gallant rickshaw puller, Xiao Qian was perhaps influenced by Thomas Hardy, whose novels he was then reading. It was nominated by the TLS as "almost the best story" in the original collection.

Xiao Qian's skill as a writer is shown in his avoidance of the sentimentality and tendentiousness that disfigures

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* In *Semolina* by Xiao Qian, Joint Publications, Hong Kong, 1984.

so much of his contemporaries' work, speaking as much as possible through the emotions and perceptions of his naive young protagonists. His strongly-felt criticisms of an unjust and unfeeling society, which are an essential part of even his most idyllic sketches, are thus expressed with a delicate obliqueness and a sense of fundamental values. To quote Anand, "He displays throughout the fine instinct of the artist by never departing from the basic emotions in spite of the excitements of a war-ridden China." (In *Life and Letters Today*) It may be that one reason for the indirect social criticism in the stories was the severe Kuomintang censorship of the 1930s. Nevertheless, for whatever reason, the stories are as fresh and appealing today as when they were first written.

In reprinting the stories from *The Spinners of Silk*, Panda Books gratefully acknowledge their initial publication by George Allen and Unwin in 1944. The author's often free translations or adaptions from that time have not been altered except for minor changes in spelling and notes. The memoir "An Album of Faded Photographs" has been specially adapted and translated for Panda Books by the author. Texts for "Cactus Flower", "The Jiang Boy" and "Shandong Deng", translated respectively by Elisabeth Eide, Xiong Zhenru and Bonnie S. McDougall, are from *A Collection of Short Stories by Xiao Qian*, People's Literature Press, 1982. The editors and translators are most grateful to Mr Xiao Qian for his unfailing assistance and advice in the preparation of this volume.

BMcD
Beijing, 1984

An Album of Faded Photographs

1. In the Dim Light

MEMORY, I suppose, is one of the marks that distinguishes men from other animals. Sometimes it is a heavy burden to the mind and sometimes an invaluable asset; people now wish that memory does not exist, now treasure it as something closest to their heart. Memory can break the barrier of time and space and render a flat picture in the mind a cameo.

A man may have travelled all over the world, but what often emerge in his dreams are not the famous mountains he has climbed nor the oceans he has crossed, but the narrow, winding lanes he used to pass through or the marshes where he used to catch frogs as a child. Memories of one's early days are invariably tinged with a peculiar colour. Even remembered pain is quite different to actual, present pain. It is like caressing one's scar: the physical pain is gone, and one rather feels a little proud of the smooth and shiny blotch.

To recollect one's early years in one's seventies is like fumbling under the dim light an old album of faded photographs covered with dust. Many people possess grand and elegant albums, but mine is just a makeshift old notebook. Between its hard black covers are some snapshots taken in earlier days. They show neither glamour nor trophies of past glory, but squalor and

misery, lean human figures looking lost and dejected. I kept this album, thinking it would go to the crematory with me. I never thought there would be a day when I could fish it out from its dark corner and let it see daylight again.

To recall the events of one's childhood is like tasting a soup in which several flavours are blended. It is also like listening to a far-off nursery song, gentle and euphonic, or feeling a branch of weeping willow brush over one's face. Sometimes it is like a nightmare, in which I am crossing a single-plank bridge with wolves and tigers howling at me with glaring eyes.

I take great delight in studying ants creeping over the windowsill. The bodies of the young ants are light brown in colour, their bellies soft and tender; as they grow old, their bodies become dark and stiff. But whether they creep in the grass or by the roadside, charging in one direction or another, they always seem so vigorous, conscientious and occupied. Mounting a steep slope, they toil strenuously; blocked by a puddle, they bravely wade through. An occasional crumb gives them immense delight. Should they see a fellow creature crippled, they will do all they can to drag it back to the ant hill, limping all the way. There seems to be a purpose in each of their movements. Yet they are totally blind and aimless in their life's destiny.

In recalling my past, I tend to identify myself with one of these ants, except that I feel I have their blindness but not their diligence.

I was born and brought up in the northeastern corner of Beijing, known as the poorest district of the city. During the forties when I was roaming abroad, I sometimes felt homesick, and my heart would fly back there.

That slum district occupies a unique place in my dreamland. I often visualize Yangguan (Goat Shepherd) *Hutong* as a lotus leaf with fringes all crumpled and myself a lotus seed lean and emaciated. Yet my widowed mother held me dearly in the middle of her palm, sometimes even clasping me inside the front of her gown. At the private school in Wacha (Broken Tile) *Hutong* I started my long and chequered education. Xiaoju (Small Chrysanthemum) *Hutong* I used to pass every morning on my way to the rug shop, and it was in that *hutong* that my mother closed her kind and gentle eyes and breathed her last.

2. A Self-Portrait

In 1932, I made an analysis (or rather drew a sketch) of myself which appeared in the Literary Supplement of the *Ta Kong Pao* the following year. It ran thus:

When he prefers to be alone, then let him, and keep away from him — the farther the better. When he becomes peevish, give him whatever he wants. But when the storm is over, you may cancel whatever you have promised him and exhort promises from him instead.

Next to headaches he most dislikes noise. When he frowns, it is a sign of anger. He demands revenge, but if the other party repents, the revenge is visited on himself.

Honeyed phrases make him sick. Similarly, he detests toad-eaters. Being hyposensitive, he can be easily hurt. Once hurt, he may recover if given time for the wound to heal. But if a person hurts him over and over again, then that person will be obliterated for ever from his affections.

Meeting a stranger, he merely toys with empty words. Once a person becomes his friend, he is quite ready to pluck his heart out and give it to him.

He often hates people, but invariably they are the ones he loves

most. The last thing he would like to be called is "tiresome"; that is the bankruptcy of one's personality.

He loves to do something for others but he refuses to take orders. Liberty is what he loves most. For the sake of liberty, he would sacrifice his rice bowl. He does not want to be the kind of Communist who denounces Marx when he is arrested and appears in court.

He refuses to be an easy-going gentleman. A wry look, a hint of ridicule, or the sight of a dead dog can make him moody for a whole day. He curses his own sensitivity. But then there are also things that he totally ignores.

He knows clearly he is no genius, so he does not wish to die early. It is only natural for people to wish for a long life. He takes pills the moment he catches a cold and he plays basketball when he feels overworked. Speaking of games, he has no athletic skills whatsoever. All he wants is to stretch his limbs and sweat.

Confronted by a woman, he is even shyer than she. But once he knows her well, he will treat her just like a man.

He dislikes white mourning cards and red wedding cards. He detests all formality. What he enjoys most is to go with a friend to a local wineshop and drink rose wine.

He can be so naive as to expose all his defects, but only before someone he loves deeply. He prefers to remain inscrutable before people he dislikes.

He loves to roam and seek adventure, yet he is afraid of the dark. Often he imagines himself a giant — this is what his mother used to call him as a small child, patting him as she helped him to dress. Now in his early twenties, he still likes to mumble in bed.

When his head is clear and sober, he feels life is just something that must be borne with. Yet he is always busily running around in order to secure a living.

He is apt to frown, and whenever he frowns he tends to view things from a pessimistic angle. Yet when he does things, he is full of hope. Often he pictures himself a patriotic hero in his dreams, only to wake up and find this noble ideal in a common body.

What harms him most is the sentimentality and suspicion of his temperament. Hence, he sometimes predicts that he will end his life either in a lunatic asylum or by suicide.

This self-portrait was made half a century ago. Looking at it today, I do not know how much truth there is in it. It may be just a mixture of self-love and self-pity.