STORIES FROM THE THIRTIES

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Modern Chinese literature, which had its origins in the New Culture Movement of 1919, reached a high level of achievement in the thirties. During this period, many fine writers emerged and a large number of their works have won critical acclaim abroad. The thirty-eight stories published in the two volumes in this collection describe urban and rural life, and provide a vivid insight into Chinese society at different levels during a time when the country was threatened by foreign aggression and in the ferment of revolution. The different styles represent the various literary trends of the period.

Panda Books
First edition, 1982

ISBN 0-8351-1019-2

Published by CHINESE LITERATURE, Beijing (37), China
Distributed by China Publications Centre (GUOJI SHUDIAN)
P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China
Printed in the People's Republic of China

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Ye Shengtao

YE Shengtao (1894-) is a native of Suzhou in Jiangsu Province. He began his writing career in 1914 and in 1921 was, along with the celebrated author Mao Dun and others, a founder member of the Literature Research Society. He has worked as an editor and a middle school and university teacher. Since 1949 he has held leading positions in the publishing and educational fields and is now a member of the standing committee of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles.

Ye Shengtao's work has been extremely influential in the history of modern Chinese literature. His richly textured writing covers a wide range of subjects in a natural and straightforward manner. His language is concise and elegant and he is known as a consummate stylist. *Ni Huanzhi* is considered his representative novel and "How Mr Pan Weathered the Storm" and "Night" are his best-known short stories.

A Year of Good Harvest

IN front of Wansheng Rice Shop was a wharf, and moored at all angles to this wharf were the open boats in which the villagers had come to sell their rice. These boats, loaded with new rice, were riding low in the water. The space between them was filled with cabbage leaves and refuse, round which swirled greasy bubbles of white scum.

From the wharf climbed narrow steps, up which no more than three men could walk abreast. The rice shop stood at the top of these steps. The morning sun, slanting down through gaps in the tiles of the roof, shed broad beams of light on the tattered felt hats bobbing up to the counter.

The owners of the felt hats had risen at dawn to row here. And once at the wharf, not waiting to catch their breath, they rushed up to this counter to see what fate had to offer.

"Polished rice, five dollars. Paddy, three," was the manager's laconic answer to their question.

"What!" The peasants in the old felt hats could hardly believe their ears. Their hopes were dashed to the ground. They were dumbfounded.

"In June you paid thirteen dollars, didn't you?"

"We paid as much as fifteen, let alone thirteen."

"How could the price drop so sharply?"

"What else do you expect in times like these? Rice

is flooding the market. A few more days and the price will fall even lower."

Coming here, the men had plied their oars as if rowing in the dragon-boat race, but now all the energy drained out of them. This year Heaven had been kind, rain had fallen in due season, there had been no plague of pests and each *mu* had yielded a few pecks more than usual. This time, they had thought they could have a breathing space. To end up even worse off than the previous year was the last thing they had expected.

"Let's not sell. Row it home and keep it!" cried one simple soul indignantly.

The manager uttered a sarcastic laugh. "Do you think folk are going to starve because you won't sell? The whole country's full of foreign rice and flour. Before the first lot's finished, foreign steamboats are shipping in a second.

Foreign rice, foreign flour and foreign steamboats were too remote to worry them. But not to sell the rice in their boats was unthinkable. That was simply angry talk. They had to sell. The landlord would be coming for his rent, and old debts must be cleared — they had run into debt to pay day-labourers and buy fertilizer and food.

"Why don't we try Fanmu?" It occurred to one of them that they might find a better price there.

But the manager snorted with laughter again and tweaked his sparse beard as he said: "Even if you go to the city, you'll find our rice guild has reached a common agreement. The price everywhere these days is five dollars for polished rice, three for paddy."

"It's no good going to Fanmu," put in one of the

peasants. "You have to pass two toll-houses, and there's no knowing how much they'd charge by way of tax. Who's got so much money to spare?"

"Won't you raise that price a little, sir?" another pleaded.

"That's easy to ask. We've sunk capital into this business, I'd have you know. To raise the price would mean giving you something for nothing. Do you take me for a fool?"

"But this price is too low, honestly it is. Who ever dreamed of such a thing? Last year we sold at seven dollars fifty. This summer rice went up to thirteen, no, fifteen, sir, as you said yourself just now. We were sure this year we'd get at least more than seven dollars fifty. Only five dollars — no!"

"Give us last year's price, sir! Seven fifty."

"Have a heart, sir. Be content with a smaller profit."

Another merchant, losing patience, hurled the stub of his cigarette into the street. "So you think the price too low!" He glared round at them. "You came of your own free will. You weren't asked to come. What's all this fuss about? We have silver dollars. If you don't sell, others will. Look, more boats have just stopped at the wharf."

Three or four more old felt hats were mounting the stone steps, the ruddy faces beneath them bright with hope. The sunlight slanted on the shoulders of their tattered cloth jackets as they joined the group.

"Wait till you hear this year's price!"

"It's even worse than last year — a paltry five dollars!" Utter despair was on the speaker's face.

"What!" Hope vanished like a pricked bubble.

But though hope vanished, they had no choice but

to sell the rice in their boats. And fate compelled them to sell to Wansheng Rice Shop. For the rice shop had silver dollars, and silver dollars were precisely what the empty pockets of those tattered cloth jackets lacked.

As they haggled over the grading of the rice and whether the measure was full enough or not, the rice boats were slowly emptied of their loads. They rode higher in the water, and the cabbage leaves and refuse between them disappeared. The peasants in the old felt hats carried the rice they had grown into Wansheng's godown in exchange for varying numbers of notes.

"Give me silver dollars, sir!" White rice should at least be exchanged for white silver dollars. If not, the bargain seemed an even worse one.

"Ignorant clods!" A hand holding a fountain-pen rested on the abacus, while scornful eyes looked at them from over spectacles. "A dollar note is as good as a silver dollar. You're not being cheated of a single cent. We don't have silver dollars here, only notes."

"Let me have notes of the Bank of China then." Judging by the design, the notes in this speaker's hand were from some other bank.

"Pah! These *are* from the Central Bank of China." The accountant levelled the forefinger of his left hand. "If you refuse them, we can take you to court."

Why should refusing banknotes be a crime? None of them understood that. After checking the figures on the notes and exchanging half-convinced, half-sceptical glances, they tucked the money into the empty pockets of their shabby jackets or the empty wallets at their belts.

Cursing under their breath, they left Wansheng Rice

Shop as another group mounted the steps from the wharf. More bubbles of hope were pricked, destroying all the joy the peasants had taken since early autumn in their heavy ears of paddy. They carried their precious white rice into Wansheng's godown in exchange not for white silver dollars but paper notes.

The streets began to hum.

The owners of the old felt hats had come to the market today intending to buy many different imported products. They had run out of soap and must take back another ten bars or so, as well as a few packages of matches. Paraffin bought from the pedlars who came to the villages cost ten coppers for a small ladle, if several households combined to buy a tin they would get much better value. Moreover it was said that the gay foreign prints displayed in the shop windows were only eighty-five cents a foot, and for months now the womenfolk had been dreaming of buying some. That was why they had insisted on coming today when the rice was to be sold, having worked out exactly how many feet they needed for themselves, how many for Big Treasure and Small Treasure. Some of the women's plans included one of those oval foreign mirrors, a snowy white square towel or a pretty knitted cap for baby. Surely this year, when Heaven had been kind and each *mu* had yielded an extra three or four pecks, they were entitled to loosen the purse-strings usually held so tightly. For there ought to be something left over even after paying the rent, their debts and the guild. With this in mind, a few of them had even toyed with the idea of buying a thermos flask. Now that was an extraordinary thing! Without a fire, the hot water you'd poured in stayed just as hot hours later when you poured it out. The

difference between heaven and earth could hardly be greater than between a thermos flask and the straw-lined box in which they kept the teapot warm.

Cursing beneath their breath, they left Wansheng Rice Shop like gamblers who have lost — lost yet again! The extent of their losses was still not clear to them. At all events, of the wad of notes in their pockets not half a note or ten cents was truly their own. In fact, they would have to raise a good many more notes somewhere to discharge their obligations — they had no idea how they were going to satisfy their creditors.

It was clear anyway that they had lost, and rowing straight home would not save the situation. If they strolled round the town and made a few purchases that would merely put them a little further in the red. Besides, there were some things they simply had to buy. So the streets began to hum.

In threes and fours, casting short shadows behind them, they walked the narrow streets. The men muttered over the price they had just been given and damned all black-hearted rice merchants. The women, a basket on one arm, a baby on the other, let their eyes dart from shop to shop on both sides of the street. As for the children, they were fascinated by the celluloid dolls, tigers and dogs from abroad, as well as the red and green tin drums and tin trumpets — also made abroad. It was almost impossible to drag them away.

"Look, sonny, at this fine foreign drum, this foreign trumpet! Want one?" Tempting voices were followed by a rub-a-dub-dub, a toot-toot-toot!

Dong-dong-dong! "Highest quality face-basins of foreign enamel! At forty cents apiece they're going dirt cheap. Buy a basin, friends!"

"Walk up, friends! Here's a splendid variety of foreign prints selling at cut prices. Eight-five cents a foot! Let me measure a few feet for you!"

The assistants in the chief shops were going all out, shouting to the villagers at the top of their voices, pulling at their cotton sleeves. For this was the only day in the year when the peasants' pockets were lined. This was a chance not to be missed.

After some deliberation spent in cutting down their budgets, the villagers handed one note and then another to the shop assistants. Soap, matches and the like were necessities, but they bought a little less than originally planned. The price of a tin of foreign paraffin was so shocking that they refrained from buying; they would have to go on purchasing a ladleful at a time from the pedlar. As for cloth, those who had decided to make two suits bought cloth for one; those who had planned new jackets for mother and son, bought enough for the son only. The oval foreign mirror, after being lovingly handled, was replaced on the counter. The knitted cap proved a perfect fit for baby; but his father's sharp veto made mother put it hastily down again. Those who had wanted a thermos flask dared not even ask the price. It might be as much as a dollar or a dollar fifty. If one threw caution to the winds and bought one, white-haired grandad and granny would be bound to scold: "Hard times like these — yet all you can think of is comfort! Throwing away a dollar fifty on a falderal like that! No wonder you've never amounted to anything. We've managed all these years without a thermos." No, life would not be worth living. Some mothers couldn't resist the longing in their children's eyes and bought the cheapest and smallest celluloid doll: you could

move its arms and legs, make it sit down, stand up or raise its arms. Naturally, the children without one were green with envy, while even the grown-ups were much impressed.

Finally, having bought a little wine and some pork from the butchers, the villagers went back to their own boats moored by the Wansheng wharf. From the stern they brought out dishes of pickled vegetables and bean-curd; then the men sat down in the bow to drink while the women started cooking in the stern. Presently smoke was rising from most of the boats, and tears were flowing from the peasants' eyes. The children alone, tumbling and rolling in the empty holds or playing with grimy treasures rescued from the water, were happier than words can tell.

Wine loosened the peasants' tongues. Neighbours or strangers, the same fate had befallen them all, and they drank together on the river. Raising his wine bowl one would voice his views, while another, putting down his chopsticks, would chime in with approbation or an oath according to the sentiments expressed. They needed this outlet for their feelings.

"Five dollars a bushel, devil take it!"

"Last year a flood, a poor crop — we lost out. This time a good year, a big crop — but we lose out again."

"We are worse off this year than last. Last year we still got seven dollars fifty."

"We've had to sell the rice we need ourselves. Heaven! The men who grow the grain can't eat it!"

"Why did you have to sell it, you old devil? I'd have kept some for the wife and sonny. I wouldn't pay the rent, but let them have the law on me and lock me up."