

RECOLLECTIONS OF WEST HUNAN

GEMS OF MODERN
CHINESE LITERATURE

SHEN CONGWEN

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

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FOREIGN LANGUAGES P

图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

湘西散记: 英文 / 沈从文著; 戴乃迭译.

-- 北京: 外文出版社, 2014

(中国文学大家译丛)

ISBN 978-7-119-08760-3

I. ①湘… II. ①沈… ②戴… III. ①散文集 - 中国 -

现代 - 英文 IV. ①I266

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字 (2014) 第062386号

责任编辑: 刘芳念

封面设计: 黄思颖

内文制作: 北京杰瑞腾达科技发展有限公司

印刷监制: 冯 浩

湘西散记

沈从文 著

戴乃迭 译

©2014 外文出版社有限责任公司

出版人: 徐 步

出版发行:

外文出版社有限责任公司 (中国北京西城区百万庄大街24号)

邮政编码: 100037 网址: <http://www.flp.com.cn>

电 话: 008610-68320579 (总编室)

008610-68995852 (发行部)

008610-68327750 (版权部)

印 刷: 北京蓝空印刷厂

开 本: 787mm × 1092mm 1/16

印 张: 10.25

2014年10月 第1版 2014年10月 第1次印刷

(英)

ISBN 978-7-119-08760-3

05500

(平)

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First Edition 2014

ISBN 978-7-119-08760-3

Published by Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd

24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China

<http://www.flp.com.cn>

Email: flp@CIPG.org.cn

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation

35 Chegongzhuang Xilu, Beijing 100044, China

P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

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Author's Preface

THIS volume of my early essays comprises eleven chosen from four collections written between 1932 and 1937, a time when I was maturing as a writer and was at the height of my powers.

The first section comes from the first two chapters of my autobiography completed between the summer and autumn of 1932. I was then teaching composition in the Chinese Department of Qingdao University in Shandong. I lived in a small, newly repaired bungalow at the corner of Fushan Road, between the college and the park. In the triangular courtyard were flowering plums clipped into the shape of mushrooms, with a profusion of tiny white blossoms emitting a faint fragrance. Only a few hundred yards away at the end of the park was the beach. From my window I could watch the sea changing colour as the sky brightened or clouded—the clouds there were often light violet or pale green, unlike any I had seen elsewhere. As the term had not begun, I spent my days working or wandering through the hills some distance from the seaside;

but the wider view there made the sea appear closer than it was. At night I seldom slept for more than three hours. Though the life was lonely I did not find it irksome, as I felt my vital forces burgeoning, waiting to flower and be put to use. In such conditions, I finished my autobiography within three weeks, and without waiting to make another copy sent the manuscript straight off to my Shanghai publisher.

The first section deals with my life as a mischievous schoolboy. Judged by conventional standards, all I learned was how to play truant; but as I see it, I was trying to find ways to dodge the feudal educational system designed to turn me into a "careerist", and to escape into the new, fresher world of Nature, in which by making full use of my senses I could have a different type of education. Of course my family and school did not recognize my method of self education, and thought me disobedient, lazy and hopeless. From my point of view, the future they had mapped out for me was a dead end. So while still a boy I left home and went out to a totally strange society to make a living. For five years I received a rigorous education along the thousand *li* of the Yuan River Valley, living from hand to mouth as a poor vagrant and meeting with some fantastic experiences. I saw hundreds of my fellow countrymen and friends die futile deaths, and was lucky to come through alive myself. But instead of being disheartened and losing faith in life, I felt I had read a big book with immensely rich contents which increased my useful knowledge and taught me the true significance of life, convincing me of the road I ought to take. Under no circumstances would I grow decadent when life seemed without hope, nor would I preen myself on some minor achievement. This education and experience encouraged me to come to Beijing empty-handed when I was twenty, to read a new, larger book; it also fired my childish imagination with the ambition to achieve something more worthwhile after ten or twenty years of additional study. In this way I made it my principle to act on my own judgement, never relying on favours granted by others or trusting to luck, nor affected by temporary ups and downs in my work. I went on studying like this for twenty-five years.

The second section of this book consists of four essays chosen from my reminiscences of west Hunan. These were based on letters to my home in Beijing during the winter of 1933 when I went back to visit my old district for a month. Later I re-edited and rewrote these letters. At first sight these essays may strike readers as commonplace travelogues describing scenery and miscellaneous incidents; but actually they touched on more complex problems than many of my short stories. In 1933 I left Qingdao University to work in Beijing; and after my marriage there in September that year my life underwent a radical change. We then lived in a detached house inside Xi'an Gate. In one corner of the courtyard by the wall were a date tree and a locust tree; and during the daytime the autumn sunlight filtered down through their branches. I had a small eighteenth-century square redwood table in the form of a Song-dynasty lantern, which I put out in the courtyard. Early each morning I worked on my story "The Border Town" there. The sunlight filtering on to my small table was an inspiration for me; yet I wrote rather slowly, completing one chapter a week. After the story was finished I sent it to the *National News Weekly* in Tianjin for publication.

But before its completion, towards the end of November, I received a letter from my old home saying that my mother was seriously ill and wanted me to go back. At that time Chiang Kai-shek had mobilized six hundred thousand troops in Jiangxi to attack Ruijin, and the raging battles were causing tens of thousands of casualties. In Hunan the local troops were waging small-scale warfare with forces from Guizhou over the opium tax; thus the situation there was rather tense too. The highway was cut. The journey there and back by boat would take more than one month, and it would be more convenient to travel alone. So I arranged with my wife that I would note down all that happened on the way and post those notes back to her. The weather had turned cold and the rivers were low. I took a boat upstream from Taoyuan in the lower reaches of the Yuan, stopping from time to time. It took me twenty-two days to reach Pushi in the middle reaches of the river. Then I travelled on foot for three days through the mountains

before finally reaching my home town—Fenghuang.

During my boat journey, I sat watching the flowing river all day long and felt very lonely. The villages along the river looked quiet, but actually there was tension in the air, and any time disaster might strike. Life was very insecure. To spare my wife in Beijing worry, I wrote her one or two letters every day, giving details of all that I saw and heard on the river, and deliberately writing in a light-hearted way. I wrote altogether more than forty letters.

While travelling on foot for three days through the mountains, I passed a pavilion in a desolate place where several of my army friends had been killed more than ten years before, and that made me sad; but that night, staying in a small hostel, I wrote a letter to reassure my family in Beijing. When I reached my old home, I learned from my elder brother many facts about the life there of which I had had no conception. Though outside I had often been considered “ideologically backward”, in my home town they regarded me as a “dangerous character”. It was easier to deal with people outside, but here once you were under suspicion it was hard to clear yourself. The only way was to leave as soon as possible. Apart from paying a courtesy call on my “superior”, I steered clear of other relatives and friends who might ask awkward questions and cause trouble. After staying by my mother’s bedside for three days, I told her that I had already taken too long a holiday and because of pressure of work must hurry back to Beijing. The return journey took me another twelve days, during which I wrote about twenty long letters describing incidents on the way. Back in Beijing, I went on with “The Border Town”, at the same time arranging my letters for publication. They later came out as a collection of essays on my travels in Hunan.

Though this slender volume of essays appears to be a travelogue written at random without much editing, each contains allusions to events and personal feelings which a careful reader can easily detect. I wrote about various wharves along the Yuan and insignificant, everyday incidents—the joys and sorrows, successes and failures of boatmen on small junks and their past and present. But what was difficult to

express was the pathos of this, and their anxiety about their fate. Even their low standard of living was hard to maintain. They were liable to be crushed by external forces, and their common fate was to come to a sad end. For example, the "commander" in my home district had thirty thousand local troops under him and for twenty years controlled thirteen counties in west Hunan; yet his troops were eventually disbanded and he lost control over them, unable to cope with life's vicissitudes. I had some premonition of this, and indeed in less than three years it came to pass. Chiang Kai-shek won a temporary victory in Jiangxi, then sent an army to annex and oppress the district, naturally achieving this without much trouble. The generals had to resign, the troops were reorganized and posted elsewhere; then Chiang Kai-shek's soldiers came in as conquerors and ravaged the countryside.

The four essays in the third section were chosen from my book *West Hunan*, written in the winter of 1937. After the War of Resistance Against Japan broke out and Beijing fell to the invaders, on August 12 I went early in the morning with some friends who taught in Beijing University and Qinghua University to catch the first train to Tianjin. The next day, staying in the French Concession, we learned from the morning paper that fighting had started in Shanghai. Our destination then was Nanjing, but being unable to go by boat to Shanghai we had to wait for some other transport. Ten days later we heard that a British merchant vessel could take us to Yantai, from where we could go by truck to the middle section of the Qingdao-Jinan Railway and there, with luck, we might get a train to Nanjing. Having no other choice, we decided to risk it. I was travelling with my friends Zhao Taimo and his wife from the Art College, Xie Wenbing and his wife from Qinghua University, and Zhu Guangqian and Yang Lingfu from Beijing University.

After about ten days we finally reached Nanjing. That night the Japanese bombed the city with a hundred planes for the first time. People there were preparing to evacuate. My friends from the north and I managed to board a British liner going to Wuhan. Beijing University, Qinghua University and Nankai University decided to set

up a temporary union university in Hunan, and the teachers from those institutions went on by train, while a few friends and I stayed on in Wuhan a little longer. Soon we were told that Yan'an would welcome about ten writers to go there, and would provide them with facilities for writing. I was among those invited, the others including Ba Jin, Mao Dun, Cao Yu and Lao She. One snowy day in December, when passing Changsha, I went with Cao Yu and some others to visit old Xu Teli in the liaison office of the Eighth Route Army, to find out the situation in Yan'an. Old Mr. Xu told us frankly that we would certainly be welcome there, but if we had other commitments or reasons for not going we could do united-front work in the interior, as this was also an important task. Because it seemed unlikely that the war would end in two or three years, and great efforts must be made to unite the people in the interior and achieve sufficient stability to wage a protracted war.

Soon after this, some friends and I went to my elder brother's new home in Yuanling. At that time the Miao leader Long Yunfei in west Hunan had just driven away the Hunan governor He Jian who advocated the study of the Confucian classics and shadow-boxing. The eighteen counties in west Hunan had been in a state of chaos; there was still unrest there. It was imperative to raise military supplies and conscript new troops. By then Nanjing had fallen and Wuchang was threatened. Many government offices and colleges were evacuating to the interior, some to Sichuan and Guizhou; but most of them had gathered in Changsha before withdrawing further. West Hunan was still the most secure area. Stability must be maintained in the interior, so as not to disrupt the war effort.

For twenty years west Hunan had been considered a "bandit area" because it would not obey the Nanjing government. It was also thought to be shrouded in mystery. Though my home town was Fenghuang, my brothers had long since moved to live in Yuanling; so I was very familiar with the social conditions of both. Soon after I went to Yuanling, they prepared to set up a new Hunan administration headed by my former superior. I was also known to Long Yunfei, the "king of the Miaos", while many other high-ranking officers and secretaries

were my relatives and friends. Though I had left my home district for more than ten years and knew little of the recent developments there, I was considered rather knowledgeable regarding the affairs of the whole country; so I was welcomed as a visitor from outside and could talk without scruples. My brother often invited important officials from our district to our home, and I would tell them news from Nanjing, Wuchang and Changsha.

We concluded that those of us in this district had a great responsibility: we must understand the situation in the whole country and make every effort to support the war of resistance, for the fate of the nation depended on it. We must have no fighting here, but must find ways to stabilize the situation and allow suitable places in various counties to all the government offices, state and private enterprises and refugees evacuated here. The ancestral temples, monasteries and all the better buildings should be put at their disposal, so that people from other provinces would no longer consider this a "bandit area", and we must unite with all the prominent figures and intellectuals in west Hunan's eighteen counties to run this district well.

I knew that many problems could not be solved in conversation, so soon after reaching Kunming I wrote this book as a systematic introduction to west Hunan, including the people and economy of the Yuan River Valley with its five tributaries, focussing on Yuanling and Fenghuang and describing in detail the good and bad points of both places. I hoped in this way to counter certain erroneous ideas by making a more objective analysis of some of the fantastic legends created by outsiders and attributed to these parts. Some legends had been made up by corrupt officials and ignorant tradesmen here, others were connected with historical traditions and the most obvious abuses in local politics. The new authorities ought to realize their responsibilities and understand the strength and weaknesses of these localities in order to face up to their difficult tasks and change the bad old ways, helping each other to set their house in order. The selection of essays both on Yuanling and Fenghuang shows that the editors of this English edition understood my intention.

The fourth section may be described as fictionalized reminiscences based on real incidents. I wrote six of these, of which three have been chosen. When I went back to Fenghuang in the winter of 1920, I was invited by a friend to attend a wedding in a village called Gaoxian about forty-five *li* from the county town, and these essays describe incidents which occurred there. There were less than two hundred families in this village, of which the Mans were the largest. Simple-minded and impulsive, they became involved in a quarrel over nothing of great consequence with a family called Tian, and the outcome was truly tragic. Several dozen people died because of this and the feud continued for two generations. The main protagonist and his only child were killed by their enemies. But I only wrote up four of these reminiscences as essays which were published in some periodical in 1947. The three chosen here are in chronological sequence. I asked Ba Jin to keep these manuscripts for me, but then forgot about them. After the “cultural revolution”, when Ba Jin recovered some of his confiscated manuscripts, he found these and posted them to me the year before last. Though these essays are not complete, the ones written up are connected and can also be read as separate essays. They were based on incidents I witnessed myself. I therefore included these as a memento, as “incomplete essays after the years of chaos”, in a collection of my essays printed in Hong Kong.

Rereading these four collections of essays, what strikes me as strange is that although written at different times, with different backgrounds and feelings, they share one common characteristic. All are permeated with a local idyllic atmosphere tinged with loneliness and sadness, as if I grieved over many of the people and events I described. Perhaps this was due to some inherent weakness in my character since I came from an ancient race, or perhaps it was just my reaction after all the wounds life had inflicted on me. What I wrote or failed to write reflect the serious injuries I suffered both physically and mentally, which could not be remedied despite all my efforts. I have now been nearly sixty years in Beijing and my life is nearing its end, yet my feelings remain those of a child. Though I took a serious attitude

towards writing, I still lack the understanding I should have regarding my successes and failures. Perhaps Professor Zhu Guangqian was right when he concluded that although warm-hearted and fond of friends, at heart I am lonely. This may explain why all my writings have so little in common with the achievements of other contemporary writers.

Beijing, September 1981

I Study a Small Book and at the Same Time a Big Book

MY reliable recollections of my childhood date back to about the time when I was two. Up to the age of four, I was as plump and sturdy as a piglet. When I turned four, Mother taught me to read characters printed on squares of paper while Granny, her mother, fed me sweets. By the time I knew six hundred characters I had worms, which made me so thin and pale that all I could eat every day was chicken liver steamed with herbal medicine. I was then going with my elder sisters to a dame-school. As the teacher was related to us and I was so small, I spent less time studying at my desk than sitting on her lap playing.

When I was six and my younger brother was two, we both came down with measles. That was in the sixth lunar month, and day and night we suffered from such fearful heat that we could not lie down to sleep, because that set us coughing and wheezing. We could not be carried either, as that made us ache all over. I remember us being encased in bamboo matting like two spring-rolls, and set to stand

in a cool, shady part of the room. The family had ready two little coffins for us on the verandah. But luckily we both recovered. Then a strapping Miao nursemaid was found for my younger brother and she took such good care of him that he grew very sturdy. But I was completely altered by this illness. I never fattened up again, but turned into a wizened little monkey.

By six I was going alone to a private school every day. I had my share of the harsh treatment then usually meted out to school-children. But as by then I knew quite a few characters and had always had an uncommonly good memory, I got off much more lightly than the others. The next year I switched to a different private school and tagged along with a few rather older boys, learning from these young rascals how to cope with old-fashioned teachers and escape from books to commune with Nature. My life that year laid the foundation for my whole subsequent character and feelings. I used to play truant, then told lies to cover up for it and escape punishment. This infuriated my father, who once threatened that if I played truant or lied again he would chop off one of my fingers. Undismayed by this threat, I never missed a chance to stay away from school. When I learned to look at everything in the world with my own eyes and went to live in a different society, I had already lost all interest in school.

My father doted on me, and for a while I was the central figure in our family. If I had some small ailment, the whole household would stay up at my bedside to nurse me, and everyone was willing to carry me. In those days we were quite well-to-do, and materially I believe I was much better off than most of our relatives' children. My father dreamed of becoming a general himself, but had higher hopes of me. Apparently he saw quite early on that I was not cut out to be a soldier, and so he never hoped I would be a general, but he told me many stories about his own father's daring exploits and what had happened to him as an officer during the Boxers' Rebellion. He believed that whatever I took up, I should rate higher than a general.

My father was the first to praise my intelligence. But he was cut to his soldierly heart by the discovery that I kept playing truant to wander

about in the sun with a band of small ruffians, and there was no way of curbing me or of stopping me from telling crafty lies. At the same time my little brother, four years my junior, had been so well cared for by his Miao nurse that he was a remarkably strong child, behaved with impressive dignity and coolness and showed great self-respect; so when I disappointed the family, they lavished their care on him. Later, indeed, he lived up to their expectations, becoming an infantry colonel at twenty-two. My father served in the army in Mongolia, the Northeast and Tibet, but in the twentieth year of the Republic (1931) he was still only a colonel, an army doctor for the local minority troops. By the time he became superintendent of a traditional Chinese hospital, he transferred his hopes of promotion to being a general to my younger brother. Finally a minor illness carried him off at home.

Having found freedom outside, I felt irked by the family's care for me, and so when they left me to my own devices that suited me better. It was my cousin Zhang who incited me to play truant and took me into the sunshine to watch the marvellous light, the fabulous colours and all the forms of life in our universe. To start with he took me to play in his family's orange and pomelo orchard, then to all the hills around, to the playgrounds of rough boys and to the bank of the river. He taught me to tell lies, one kind to the family, another kind to the teacher, and got me to chase around with him everywhere. When we went to school, to stop us from swimming in the river during the midday break, our teacher used to write the character "big" (大) in vermilion on the palms of our hands. But holding that hand up in the air, we still splashed about in the river for several hours. This method was thought up by that cousin too. I was a volatile child, highly impressionable. And the beauty of my life as a boy was closely bound up with water. My school was virtually on the river bank. It was water that opened my eyes to loveliness and taught me to think for myself. And it was that rascally cousin of mine who introduced me to the river.

Looking back, I can see that as a child I was not completely lacking in self-respect. I was no dunce. Of all my cousins and brothers at that time, the only one smarter than me was probably Zhang. I was