

Compiled by He Jianming

CHINESE LITERATURE

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THE WRITERS PUBLISHING HOUSE

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Preface

Walking Tall with Hearts Open to the World

He Jianming

China's present advances, complementing its ancient civilization of over five thousand years, provide the finest affirmation for Chinese people to be able to walk tall and with open hearts to all corners of the world. Yet for more than a century, accurate portrayals of the Chinese people have been hard to find, which in a certain sense is unjust and not in keeping with the common values shared by all humanity. This omission becomes even more poignant when considering how this remarkable and marvelous culture, belonging not only to the Chinese nation but to all of humanity, should be shared by all the world's peoples. Perhaps due to ideological differences, or possibly even to technical challenges in translating Chinese characters, this failure to secure the rightful place of Chinese culture amid a

vibrant world of literature is indeed a cause for regret.

Chinese Literature in English has been launched with the mission to bridge this chasm. We will do our best in endeavoring to enable people across the world to gather a fuller picture of today's China and her people by fostering understanding through present-day Chinese literature. Alongside the Chinese people, *Chinese Literature* can thus walk tall with open hearts through the world, allowing for greater exchange of ideas with other peoples living on this planet, suffusing warmth through shared spiritual and emotional worlds. This is the dream for *Chinese Literature* which we hope will be realized one day soon.





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Confidences in a Hair Salon



Wang Anyi

*T*he tiny hair salon is in a temporary structure built onto the external wall of another building, intruding on to the corner pavement. Further on, a small noisy lane joins the main road. The owner is a thirty-year-old hairdresser from northern Jiangsu Province, who left the hair salon across the street to start his own business. Actually, he might not even be from northern Jiangsu, but since hairdressers are supposed to originate from there, he has adopted the accent to display his lineage. To go with the accent, he has the fair complexion, and stiff dark hair cut in a flattop with slightly longer sideburns. This rural fashion makes him look a bit blackguardly, but this is counteracted by an unaffected expression of decency. These hairdressers are usually even-featured, with bright eyes under dark brows, and straight noses. Compared to other men, their well-defined looks may seem a bit effeminate, but again, it's really just because they come from the countryside. They tend to be talkative and favor feminine topics, and together with the exaggerated

drawn-out Yangzhou accent, this makes them sound even more like gossipy women, in interesting contrast to their tall manly bodies. Their hands, too, are fair and soft like a woman's, but bigger and longer, which makes them strangely attractive. Such hands have been nurtured by warm water, shampoo and conditioner, and most of all, by the frequent touching of hair, particularly women's hair. They brandish their scissors with a touch of showmanship, up and down and then, with a quick snip, the locks drift to the floor. The comb in the other hand scoops up a strand, the scissors descend seemingly at random and, after a bout of rapid snipping, the pace slows. Carefully the hair is combed, the scissors measure the hair tips, and the blades open. Truly, they know when to move quickly, and when to be slow.

This man from northern Jiangsu, the owner, happens not to be very talkative. He also dresses differently, in a tight black leather jacket that limits his movements a bit. Perhaps he feels that, now that he is an owner, he cannot dress as casually as a mere hairdresser. Also, as he has just started the business, he is naturally a bit nervous, and so must be circumspect. He does the cutting and styling, and has hired two young women to wash and set the curlers for perms. With them around, the salon is a noisy place. They both come from somewhere in southern

Anhui Province, but their accent is hard to place, with some falling tones close to the northern Jiangsu dialect, but mostly from further north. The main difference lies in the thicker sounds. One is just over twenty while the other is closer to thirty, but they look surprisingly similar, probably because of their clothes and hairstyle. Both sport thinned, wispy uneven cuts that raggedly frame their round faces, giving them a slightly wild look. Yet both have direct gazes, and look straight at people like bold country girls. They would even be pretty if not for their slightly blank expressions. Both wear fitting knitted tops with nylon lace at the collar and open sleeves – one in apple green, the other peachblow. These are matched with three-quarter-length blue jeans sporting one-inch slits on the legs, and round-toed platform shoes with buckles. These are women who have done manual outdoor work and have developed strong shoulders, arms, back and hips, so the fashionably tight clothes not only make them look constrained, but are also an awkward fit. When both barber chairs are taken up by customers, each stands behind one and pours the shampoo with one hand while kneading the hair with the other into a mass of white lather. Then, they sink both hands into the suds and rub and scratch and tug, moving their shoulders and lifting their arms in exactly the same way as if taught by one

teacher, following the same procedure in unison. While they rub and scratch, they like to watch the customers' faces in the mirror opposite, staring at them as if to probe their secrets. Then they turn to talk to each other in loud voices with clear laughter, quite uninhibited. The owner does not reprimand them. Clearly, he is a silent man, even thoughtful. At this point, they let up a bit and just go through the motion, which usually brings protests from the customers, "Stop the fluff and buff; give me a good rub and scratch." Rebuked, the young women would act aggrieved, "The last customer said my nails were too sharp!" To which the customer would retort, "Sharp or not, what's the use if you just stroke the surface?" At this point, the owner gets up and comes over to wash the customer's hair himself. The young woman walks over to the washbasin, still looking aggrieved, and rinses off her hands. Then she goes to sit on the folding metal chair by the wall, her attitude plainly saying, "Well then, I'll take a rest!" They have already picked up smooth city ways.

A number of idlers frequent the shop – they live nearby and have nothing better to do than sit here. Customers mistake them for a queue, and often ask as they push open the door, "Is this the line for a haircut?" To which everyone hastily says together, "No, no line!" so they won't be frightened off. Most of these onlookers

are women; some come with knitting, while others just sit with folded hands. Though they are idle, they all look a bit groggy and messy, as if they had just climbed out of bed and come straight here. Or maybe it really is not weariness – just a grubby look from the thick secretive atmosphere of the place. And in fact, there have been a couple of times when someone who used to come in disheveled and crumpled, suddenly transformed into a different person with makeup, clean clothes and high heels, strutting by without so much as a glance at the shop, on her way to some engagement. By the next visit, the good times are over and things are back to normal. They recall the previous night's mahjong game, the cheating, the bickering, the wins and the losses; or maybe it has been a wedding banquet, and then the comments range over the bride and groom's looks, their get-up, the food and the decorations, the status of the guests. It's like the final curtain on a concert. The fluctuations of the stock market, the dispute between the shop owner next door and his employees, the happenings in the nearby lanes, the meanness or good humor of the last customer – all are good grist for the gossip mill. With them around, the two girls from Anhui need never feel lonely or sad – not to mention all the things they can learn. When they get into a tiff with a picky customer, these other women

smooth things over. They are all knowledgeable about the ways of the world. You might even find it a bit strange that such worldly people come to this little shop to chat with two girls from Anhui. Is it unusual for them to be so easygoing? It turns out that city people are not nearly as proud as they look, and when it comes down to it they don't have such a strong sense of hierarchy. These women live in crowded places, and they love excitement, and fear peace and quiet the most. In some ways, they are not as tough internally as the girls from the provinces. This is probably the result of a sense of superiority born of the fact that their lives are secure, so they need not be on guard all the time. Of course, it's also because they live "simply," though this sounds an unlikely choice of words to describe them. However, in fact it is quite apt, because living a long time in the heart of the city, one discovers after a while that there is also a rustic village quality here. As time goes by, superficialities float to the surface and are swept away, while the more substantial sinks and settles. Such things are not that complicated, but they are what really determine lifestyle. Consequently, few of these idle women have any idea what the two girls say about them behind their backs. As they walk brightly past the glass door, they cannot guess what complex feelings are hidden in their gaze behind the door.

Every morning about nine o'clock, as the curtain over the glass door is pulled back, the door is unbolted from the inside. The street being a bit crooked, the building does not face squarely in one direction and so, for some reason, the sun shines directly onto the mirror, creating a dazzling light. The two young women arrange the chairs, tidy the dressers, all the while inspecting themselves in the mirrors and tweaking their clothes and hair. It is a bit like preparing the stage for curtain time. Should an early customer push open the door and come in, he or she would find the air stuffy with many different smells: quilt and mattress odors, body odor mixed with scented face cream, hints of different foods like rice gruel, pickled vegetables, fried dough sticks, and the scent of hot metal from an electric hotplate. The young women live in the shop, and stow their camp beds, bedding and utensils outside the back door, which gives onto the rear veranda of the adjoining building. Here they have used flattened cardboard boxes to portion off a small storage space, which they fill with their stuff, and then cover with a plastic sheet. Every household living in this narrow alley has a similar pile behind their place, so this one blends in. A while later, the owner arrives to check if anything is right, and then leaves. After a bit, he comes back to check again and then is gone once more. He seems very

busy with outside matters. Since opening the salon, his appearance has changed. He looks more sunburned, or at least more weathered, as if covered with hoar. The former leisurely expression of the skilled craftsman nonchalant in his casualness has been replaced by an anxious look. His black leather jacket is really quite disreputable: stiff and discolored, it makes him look like a salesman of aquatic products. His black cowhide shoes are dusty and weathered too. After going in and out a couple of times, he settles down, and if there are no haircuts or stylings to perform, sits behind the counter. At his back is a glass cupboard with a mirror, and on the shelves are displayed shampoos, hair perm products, conditioners, and hair dyes. There is a cardboard sign propped up on the counter with rows of numbered hair-color samples. The salon might be small, but it has everything. The owner sits behind the counter, grooming his nails like a woman, which also betrays his true profession.

Sitting with head lowered, he pays no attention to the young women chatting noisily with the onlookers. One might almost forget he is there except that, in a strange way, all conversations seem to be directed at him. It is as if, without him, the talk would become less lively, more desultory and disjointed. After all, this silent person is the owner and the heart of the shop. He gazes at the

busy street scene through the glass door opposite, where ordinary daily life goes on. The people know each other, and what they each do. Here, in the heart of the city, deep within these residential streets, there is a cut-off, country quality. The waves of the outside world cannot wash in here, only creating a disturbance by beating on the nearby shore. The owner has a faraway look on his face, the look of all those who are just starting out and are struggling to get going; when he gets a quiet moment to himself, he would think "Is all this worth it?" The chatter in the shop is lively, the two girls are excited, their hands moving back and forth on the customers' heads, their bodies jigging about as if in a dance. Soapsuds fly into the customers' eyes and they protest, once, twice, and by the third time, there is trouble in the air. Just as the owner is about to get up, someone slides over and pushes the young Anhui woman out of the way. She lives above the department store down the street; her husband is in business but she does not work and is a regular bystander in the shop.

Rising from the folding metal chair, she walks up to the customer while rolling up her sleeves, then lifts her arms and, with deft smoothing movements of hands on both sides of the hair part, scoops the suds off the customer's forehead. Quickly she piles the lather up on