



*A Selection*  
of Cao Wenxuan's  
Stories

Cao Wenxuan

曹文轩

 NEW WORLD PRESS

A SELECTION OF  
CAO WENXUAN'S STORIES

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贵州师范学院内部使用



NEW WORLD PRESS

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Written by Cao Wenxuan

Translated by Wu Li, Qu Hua and Zhou Gang

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## The Nets

A hundred steps from the village lay a deep, clear river that met with several streams. In summer, two main streams voluntarily shared their water to relieve its drought. In autumn, the rising river repaid the streams with its water. From spring to winter, the river never stopped flowing, be it swiftly or slowly. Lush waterweed swayed with the flow as if thousands of ponytails rocked with the wind.

Local farmers looked at the river every day for years, but seldom saw it, much less realized its value.

Yet, Old Kangtai, a nobody in the eyes of nobodies, fixed his dim eyes on it. He swallowed hard while rubbing his rough, stiff, cracked hands, with his mind in feverish excitement; he was so ready to make a big deal out of it.

Today, everybody had something that could bring them success. But Old Kangtai was not a somebody, not even a nobody. His fellow farmers, who had been donkeys for decades, all evolved into foxes overnight – like a bonehead who woke up from a ringing slap on the face – and found their own way to wealth by keeping their ears sharp

and eyes open. Old Kangtai was the only one who still struggled to earn his living, clinging to a small piece of barren field and two low-thatched cottages. He, of course, was looked down on by Hulu, Li Sanhua, and other shrewd villagers. In addition, he had to deal with the taunts from his old wife every day and night: "You dumb! All you know is waiting. If you keep on waiting, one day you'll be driven into a corner! You really are no use at all..." Well, that could not be denied. Old Kangtai was incompetent, unintelligent, and inferior to anyone else in everything. He did not even have a daughter, while others already enjoyed the happiness brought by their children and grandchildren. Locals also blamed this misfortune on his uselessness. It was fine with him. Old Kangtai had no intention of explaining himself. But, to the endless complaints from his old wife, Old Kangtai believed he had to right the wrongs: "Come on! You want me to fake preserved eggs with mud-caked potatoes and sell them to townsfolk? You want me to cook chickens and ducks that died from bird flu in heavily seasoned sauce and peddle them in the street? That's god-forbidden evil. No way!" At the end of his speech, he was not so cross as at the beginning. Never had he done anything foul in his life, yet, never had he been treated fairly. Why didn't God award him a child? He could not help but feel rather dejected. Anyway, he let the thought go after a short while, and instead kept concerning himself with his living.

Even waste, like quicklime, can be used to heat water. Old Kangtai would surely have his day.

One day, tired from mowing grass on the riverside, Old Kangtai rested by the water, watching crucian carp bite each other's tail. At first, he just found it funny. Shortly afterwards, he abruptly hit his head hard with his hand and cheerfully rushed straight home, not caring about his

freshly-mowed grass and yelling out before reaching the cottage:

“Net... Net!...”

His old wife came out from the cottage and saw his proud face. Instantly, her eyelids drooped: “What now?!”

It took Old Kangtai quite some time to make his idea clear to his old wife. He, who grew up fishing, was a good hand at using a fishing hook, net, spear, or whatever. He planned to make a net to catch fish and sell them for money!

His old wife was truly happy, then her spirit sank: “Thank God, my old man finally came up with something big. But he’s talking about a net and that will be expensive!”

“It takes no less than 1,000 yuan to get a seine net.” Old Kangtai sat on the worn-out threshold, burying his thick head in his arms, drained of ideas.

That night, his old wife lay awake, pondering the big deal and eventually making up her mind. Before dawn, she kicked the bony butt of Old Kangtai: “About the net, we’ll do it!”

“What about the money?” Old Kangtai asked, completely devoid of confidence.

His old wife figured: “Two hundred from our old age savings that’s hidden in the crack in the east wall. Plus, a hundred from our coffin budget. We’re not gonna die soon anyway, are we? It’s up to the villagers to deal with our bodies. We have no kids. We die and it’s over. We probably end up as a handful of ash. Besides, there isn’t land for our coffins...”

Old Kangtai put on a long face: “That... That is not enough.”

“If we’re going to use the net, we have to build a shed by the river

and live there year round. These two cottages sit on land belonging to the school. They have long tried to get us to move. I heard they're planning a kitchen."

"You mean sell the cottages?" Old Kangtai was shocked.

"You old fool. If you earn enough money, you can get me a new house. I don't mind living under a tile roof for the last few years of my life!"

The old couple did not settle the discussion until the sun began to rise from the east. Old Kangtai proposed a less daring plan to make a half-length seine net. His wife agreed without extra thought considering their financial situation.

With no time to waste, the old wife began weaving the fishing net with shuttles, and Old Kangtai began setting piles, building a support, and erecting a pulley. The old couple immersed themselves in hard work. A month later, a large seine net, dyed red with pig blood, was carefully cast over the limpid river, splashing water onto the tangerine sky in the sunset glow.

Haul in the net, cast the net; again, haul in the net, cast the net... A night of work brought Old Kangtai a generous bulk of fish. In the bucket, half immersed in the river, were five kilograms of fish! He lay on the riverbank, looking in the bucket, joyful, like a child. A wild carp caught him off guard, splattering his face with water from a fierce swing of its tail. Old Kangtai wiped away the drops with a satisfied smile. He ordered his wife in a commanding tone: "Pick a fat one and make me some soup!" Giving an order to his old wife was definitely a feat of great daring for him.

Surprisingly, his old wife readily followed his order.

The days to come were days of a bumper harvest.

The net brought a glow to Old Kangtai's wrinkled face, pleasure to his boring life, and even a louder voice (maybe the nutritious fish soup can take credit for this). The net also worked magic on Old Kangtai's rigid brain, which now managed to produce fertile imagination. He thought to himself: "I'll build a tile-roofed house, and the roof must have upturned eaves; I'll build the house in the village center and show everyone my success. I'm no dummy. I'm no loser. I AM KANGTAI. Got me?! I'll buy my wife new clothes. I can't say she's lucky marrying me. She has no new clothes, only patches and patches. She's not a beggar. She deserves decent clothes to make her look good. She's old now, but when she was young, she was a fair lady, too. Why else would I ask her to marry me? I'll leave the most for food. But then, I don't have kids. Who would I save the money for? I'm no idiot. I will eat, and eat the best! Eating is living. I'll use all the money before leaving this world with my wife, and only leave a big house behind to remind everyone it belongs to Kangtai!"

Unlike Old Kangtai, his old wife stayed calm, with no wishful thinking and keeping the success to themselves. In the morning, she covered the bucket with a cloth and went to faraway towns to sell the fish. She gave the standard answer to villagers who inquired about how good the harvest was: "Can't be worse. It's not even enough to feed a cat." What a shrewd woman! The villagers had long forgotten about fishing since it had been forbidden for the past ten years or so. If she broadcasted their success, she knew the news would serve as an alarm to wake everyone up. As a result, the old wife covered the big bucket and hid it deep at the river bottom during the day. She only showed villagers another bucket with some small fish in it: "That's all we've got."

However, since fishing was a daytime job, it was impossible to hide

the truth from the villagers for long. Word that Old Kangtai made a pile of money quickly spread throughout the village. It did not garner much attention though. Most people let it go in one ear and out the other because they turned up their nose at Old Kangtai. But some listened and kept it in mind. To farmers, seeing was believing. Soon, villagers began to visit the riverside shed of the old couple using all kinds of excuses. Whenever they came, the old wife gave strict orders to Old Kangtai not to haul his net, so no one would see what the old couple had really achieved.

It was noon. The sun was bright and warm, making spinning heads drowsy. Old Kangtai, exhausted from staying up all night, was leaning against the pulley and falling asleep. Suddenly, he heard a hazy, yet special, sound coming from the water. His years of experience had taught him that it was a big fish bumping into his net! He suddenly awoke and jumped to his feet in a way too agile and vigorous for a man over sixty. Without delay, he turned the handle of the pulley a few rounds and the opening of the net emerged from the river. As expected, a huge fish was in the net! The fish was fierce, rushing and crashing all over the net, creating splashes here and there. Old Kangtai knew he could not haul the net out of the water because a fish this big would either leap over the net and flee or crash through the net and escape. Old Kangtai may be terrible at doing anything else, but he definitely excelled at fishing. He hauled the net until it was about to leave the river, took off his shirt, dove into the river with only his boxer shorts on, and stuck his fingers into the gills until the fish could not move anymore. Then, holding the fish in his arms as if it were a baby, he cheerfully headed back to the river's bank. At this point, Li Sanhua, Hulu, and others came from the fields to visit the shed.

Astonished, the crowd yelled, galloped down from the dam, and dashed to the riverside.

It was Old Kangtai's moment! Never in his life had he done anything amazing or outstanding. To his fellow villagers, he had always been nobody. His existence had made no difference to anyone or anything. It had never been about him when people gathered to watch or talk. What now? Dozens of eyes were focusing on him with surprise, longing, and jealousy! Old Kangtai was confident, despite the fact that the villager's eyes were fixed on the huge fish in his hands. He felt he was walking on air. The warning from his old wife had left no trace in his head. He held the huge fish in his arms and stretched his bony chest as broad as possible, picturing himself as a majestic general. He threw the fish on the riverside grass: "Look at it!"

Li Sanhua exclaimed: "It must weigh five kilograms!"

Old Kangtai grinned: "If it's anything less than 6.5 kilograms, I'll give it to you free!"

His old wife stood at the door of the shed, rubbing her hands. She sincerely wished that he had not caught that noticeable fish and she could have been close enough to stop him from boasting. Unfortunately, she was blocked by the crowd.

Old Kangtai wiped his wet hair and beard, saying: "In half a month I've only caught five fish this size!"

The crowd exchanged looks. They sized-up the appearance of Old Kangtai and wondered to themselves: "I can't say that Old Kangtai is handsome or imposing, but he doesn't look bad actually. He has thick eyebrows and a prominent nose. Those are symbols of fortune and dignity. Why didn't I see that before?" Old Kangtai thought: "Never mind, it's fine." Old Kangtai had a mind broad enough to sail a boat,

and he totally forgave the villagers who had treated him without proper respect. He turned around, took his shirt from the ground, and draped it over his shoulders. Then, from its pocket, he took out a pack of cigarettes (he had gradually smoked more cigarettes instead of pipes) and handed them around, just as the teachers did. He scratched the pack open with his fingernail, flicked its bottom to drive a cigarette out, pulled the cigarette out, and offered it to Li Sanhua. Then, he flicked the bottom again, pulled another cigarette out, and offered it to Hulu, who had stayed quiet the entire time. One after another, Old Kangtai offered everyone in the crowd a cigarette, costing him over half the pack. It was impressively generous for the truly stingy Old Kangtai.

His old wife stood at the door of the shed, muttering: "Damn it! Stop showing off!"

Old Kangtai somehow managed to flexibly work his tongue, complacently talking with the crowd and not caring that he was still soaking wet. His old wife could take it no longer. She used the excuse of giving Old Kangtai a towel in order to push her way to the front, knitting her eyebrows and glaring at him. But, her stupid husband was not at all aware of her intention to warn him. Instead, he just continued blazing the river, his net, and his fish.

His old wife could only try to deny this: "Don't be fooled by his boasts! All he caught were a few fish no bigger than a shrimp, and for that he sees himself as king of the world. I believe catching a big one, like today, is a one-time, lucky thing!"

Old Kangtai was rather annoyed: "We neither steal nor rob. We made the net ourselves and caught the fish ourselves. Why can't I talk about it? They're villagers we've known for years."

His old wife was so pissed-off that she just wanted to hit him on the

arm, hard.

The crowd laughed, but said nothing.

At that moment, Fat Feng, from the middle school canteen in town, waddled up. He was a regular customer of Old Kangtai. His eyes lit up upon seeing the unexpectedly huge fish: “Hey buddy, give me that fish. How much is it? Some authorities are visiting the school.”

The crowd witnessed the transaction in silence. Fat Feng put the fish in his basket, handed Old Kangtai a ten yuan bill and a five yuan bill without hesitation, and, panting heavily, waddled away with the basket.

To the villagers, these two bills radiated magical light. They could not take their eyes off them, nor suppress their impatient desires.

Someone, for an unknown reason, sighed deeply and said, dispiritedly: “We should get back to work.” The crowd shuffled back to the dam, with no one saying anything and devoid of the passion they had when sprinting to the shed.

Right after the crowd left, the old wife dragged Old Kangtai into the shed: “Are you out of your mind? Farmers are typically short-sighted. Sooner or later, all of them will rush to fish in the river. You think you can still be in the game then? Bullshit!...” Old Kangtai blinked. His mind suddenly went blank, except for the thought to give himself a slap in the face. He sat on the ground like a pile of dirt, upset and unable to move.

The crowd climbed back up to the dam.

After a while, Li Sanhua broke the silence: “Don’t listen to his boasts! What, the river’s packed with fish? It’s just the so-called ‘a fly dies when he farts – it’s a pure coincidence!’”

Immediately, someone echoed Li Sanhua’s opinion: “He doesn’t even have the luck to meet a coincidence.”

Even Hulu joined in: “Do I not know the river well? It’s polluted by the pesticides and chemical fertilizers we use in our fields every day. It’s impossible for fish to survive in it.”

Everyone tried to manufacture some argument to persuade the others that there were no fish in the river, there were many ways to succeed in today’s world, and fishing with a net was the stupidest one, and only mediocre, incapable guys like Kangtai would put all his effort into using a net. They casually expressed these arguments in the most convincing manner, yet did so with a disdainful attitude. The next day, villagers noticed that Li Sanhua and Hulu did not come to the fields.

These two guys mattered to the villagers. The almost 40-year-old Li Sanhua was smooth and slick. His silver tongue could talk the dead back to life. The almost 50-year-old Hulu generally stayed quiet, but he was always thinking about every possible means of gaining extra benefit. It was fair to say that Hulu was a scheming, calculating person. However, these two did not arouse aversion among villagers because they were the ones villagers could trust with their weddings and funerals. Li Sanhua was the perfect receptionist, pleasing every guest with his words. Hulu was the perfect manager, guaranteeing smooth and accurate execution of every detail, from keeping accounts of cash gifts to arranging seats. In addition, these two were always willing to lend a hand.

Li Sanhua and Hulu met on the road.

“Hey Hulu, why aren’t you in the field?” Li Sanhua asked.

“I have something to do.” Hulu barely paid any attention to Li’s question, hurrying away with his hands behind his back.

Li Sanhua looked at Hulu’s receding figure, scratching the back of his head and hurrying away as well.

Early on the third day, before villagers had left their homes, Hulu tucked the money just raised under his clothes and secretly headed for town.

There was a shop, selling all kinds of fishing nets, beside a bridge in the southern part of town.

Hulu saw the shop, felt for the money, nodded his head with a smile, and walked in. He lifted his head just in time to see Li Sanhua standing under the fishing nets, measuring the width of the meshes with his fingers. Hulu, shocked and his mouth agape, lightly stepped back to the door.

“May I help you?” the salesperson asked Hulu with a smile.

Li Sanhua looked back at the newcomer. Stunned, Li said: “Hulu! What... What are you doing here?”

“What... What about you?” Hulu replied.

“Me?” Sanhua blinked. “You mean I should work hard in the field my whole life? I don’t deserve a moment in town to relax in a park or a theatre? I heard the male chimpanzee in the park north of town will throw himself on every woman he meets. You may want to check it out. Why are you in town?”

Hulu, composed, answered: “My second daughter is going on a trip at the end of this month. I’d like to buy her a suitcase.” Hulu left the shop.

“I also have to go,” Li said.

The two headed in different directions.

It was a small town, with only one shop selling fishing nets. Li Sanhua returned to the shop when he figured Hulu was nowhere near it. However, Hulu was the first thing he saw in the shop. The two men looked at each other, smiling embarrassingly.

“Now talk to me, Hulu. Which one would you choose?”

“Fine. I measured the river. It’s 17 meters wide. The net should be the same width as the river. Now, go get it. The mesh should be three-finger wide.”

“Don’t laugh at me, but I won’t let the small fish go. I’ll go for a two-finger one.”

Each man carried a fishing net, weighing about 30 kilograms, back to the village once it had gotten dark outside. Without a break, Li Sanhua halted the family dinner and hurried his sons and daughters to gather all the tools and parts, like ropes and the pulley secretly made several days before, and follow him to the river to set up the net. He did so by stealth because he was afraid that the best location, which he had identified two days before, would be occupied by someone else. The location was no more than 100 steps from Old Kangtai’s net. It was at a point where the river met with two smaller streams running in from the east and west. The spot had water flowing in from four directions. Now that Hulu discovered he had also bought a net, didn’t Li have every right to worry that Hulu would occupy the location before him?

“No one’s here!” Li Sanhua placed a bamboo stick, used for support, on the ground. He took a deep breath and thought: “Hulu, hah, your net is doomed to stay down there below Old Kangtai’s!”

However, as they were about to set up their net, Hulu showed up, followed by his sons and daughters, all carrying the things needed to set up a net.

“To come late makes it all in vain. This location. . . Hah hah!” said Li.

The third son of Hulu cried out: “We’re setting up our net here!”

“Hey kid, you really should pray for longer legs.” Li Sanhua turned

to his sons and daughters, and exclaimed: "Idiots, why are you standing stock still. Go, go, go!"

Hulu stepped up: "Hold on."

"Hulu, we've known each other for a long time. We shouldn't have a falling-out over such a spot. First come, first choice. That's the rule, isn't it?"

Hulu did not respond, but instead ran directly to the riverside. He kneeled down on one knee and extended his other leg into the water, searching carefully. After a while, one end of a rope was gripped between his toes and emerged from the water. Hulu grasped the rope, straining and winding it around his arm until a V-shaped structure showed itself in the middle of the river. This was very Hulu-like. The shrewd Hulu always thought one step ahead and arranged everything in advance.

Li Sanhua was shocked, his mouth dropped open as wide as a dustpan.

Hulu nodded to Li Sanhua, and responded with a smile: "As you said, first come, first choice." He turned to his sons and daughters, and exclaimed: "Idiots, why are you standing stock still. Go, go, go!"

"You son of a bitch! Fine, you won!" Li Sanhua knew he was no match for Hulu. He could not show that he was annoyed or furious, so he just nodded his head at Hulu, with a bitter smile, and shouted in anger at his own sons and daughters: "Why are you still standing here?" Then, he carried the bamboo stick on his shoulder and left, not forgetting to knock at Hulu with the end of the stick.

Hulu had a lot of talent and a big heart. He, of course, would not make a fuss about it like Li Sanhua would.

That night, on either side of Old Kangtai's net, each of the two men set up his own seine net in the river.

Everything was done quietly, raising no alarm in Old Kangtai. He