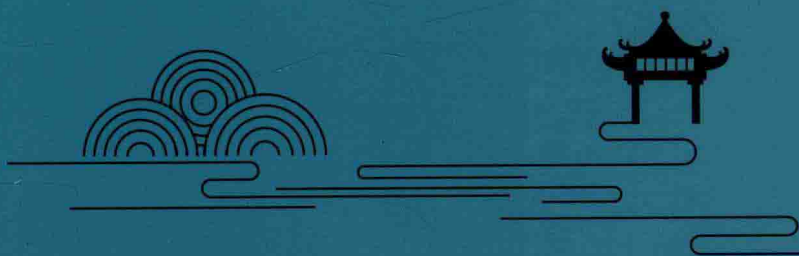




Edited by Pan Wenguo

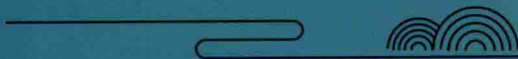
READINGS OF
CHINESE CULTURE SERIES
ESSAY II

Translated by Zhang Peiji



中国经典文化走向世界丛书
散文卷 二

庄智象◎总策划 潘文国◎总主编
张培基◎译





国家出版基金项目
NATIONAL PUBLICATION FUND PROJECT

Planned by Zhuang Zhixiang Edited by Pan Wenguo

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

中国经典文化走向世界丛书. 散文卷. 二/潘文国主编; 张培基译.
—上海: 上海外语教育出版社, 2018
ISBN 978-7-5446-5157-8

I. ①中… II. ①潘… ②张… III. ①中国文学—综合作品集—英文
②散文集—中国—英文 IV. ①I211

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2018)第014179号

出版发行: 上海外语教育出版社

(上海外国语大学内) 邮编: 200083

电 话: 021-65425300 (总机)

电子邮箱: bookinfo@sflep.com.cn

网 址: <http://www.sflep.com.cn> <http://www.sflep.com>

责任编辑: 杨莹雪

印 刷: 上海华业装璜印刷厂有限公司

开 本: 700×1000 1/16 印张 14.75 字数 326千字

版 次: 2018年3月第1版 2018年3月第1次印刷

印 数: 2 100 册

书 号: ISBN 978-7-5446-5157-8 / I

定 价: 48.00 元

本版图书如有印装质量问题,可向本社调换

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“Cherish one’s own beauty, respect other’s beauty, and when both beauties are respected and cherished, the world will become one”, said Fei Xiaotong, a famous Chinese sociologist at a celebration party in honor of his eightieth birthday about thirty years ago. In a time of growing interest in intercultural communication today, these words sound especially wise and far-sighted. Translation, as one of the most important means for cultural communication, is usually done into one’s mother tongue from other languages by native translators. This largely guarantees the quality of translated text, so far as the linguistic readability is concerned. However, this method implies a one-sidedness in correspondence, as only the translator’s “respect for other’s beauty” is concerned, regardless, though not completely, of how the local people look upon and cherish their own beauty. It should be compensated by translations on the other way, that is, works selected, interpreted, and translated by the local people themselves into languages other than their own. This approach may go directly against the prevalent views in modern translation theories but, in my opinion, is worthy of practicing. It is perhaps an even more effective way to bring about successful communication in cultures, and the beauties of the world can really be shared by the world’s people. It is with such understanding that the Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Press is organizing a new series of books, entitled *Readings of Chinese Culture*, to introduce Chinese culture, past and present, to the world, with works selected and translated by the Chinese scholars and translators.

The series will cover a wide range of writings including but not restricted to works of different literary genres. For the first batch, we are glad to provide three books of essays and one book of short stories, all written by authors of the 20th century. They will be continued by a batch of serious academic writings on premodern Chinese classics in philosophy, literature, and historiography, written by influential scholars of our time.

Later, we will offer more books on classical Chinese drama, classical Chinese poetry, etc.

Some of the books in the series have been published before, but they have been revised and rearranged for the new purpose to meet the current needs of broader readers. We are looking forward to hearing comments and suggestions on the series for future improvement.

Pan Wenguo

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American Men and Women

© Shi Zhecun^①

Various newspapers of late carry letters from readers reflecting social conditions or more often requesting solutions to knotty problems in life. I am fond of reading them because they mirror the life and thought of people of all descriptions.

The same is true of foreign newspapers. Some of them have set up special columns with special columnists in charge of answering questions. An American woman journalist named Ann Landers was once put in charge of such correspondence for over 800 newspapers respectively. Known as “Ann Landers’ Column”, it became extremely popular with readers. Every day, the first thing that attracted the attention of readers, totalling at least 30 million, would be this special column.

Landers’ letters, later appearing in several collections, have been selling like hot cakes. Several years ago, my old friend Qian Gechuan sent me from the US two collections of Landers’ letters that he had selected and translated for the benefit of Chinese learners of English. The letters were originally written in present-day English with up-to-date idioms and colloquialisms, many of which have not yet been compiled into dictionaries.

There were in the two collections altogether 200 letters to and from Landers, of which about 80% were sent by American young men and women asking for her advice on problems of marriage, love, ways of society, etc. The problems confronting them were entirely different from

① Shi Zhecun (Shi Depu, 1905-2003), famous scholar, translator, educator, editor, and essayist. He was regarded as the founder of modernist short stories in China.

those of Chinese young people. Many were quite unimaginable to us. Now let me cite two striking examples for the information and chit-chat of my readers. Meanwhile, they may also serve to put our youth on the alert.

Here is the story of a 30-year-old American woman. At the age of 20, seeing all her girl friends already married, she worried about herself some day becoming an old maid and therefore quickly married a man whom she had known for barely two months. Eleven months later, they had a baby and began to lead a cat-and-dog life. And when the husband suggested swapping wives with another man for pleasure, she agreed. And they joined a club where male members could have sex with each other's wife. Then it happened that she refused to go to bed with a man chosen by her husband because he was not to her liking. She then wrote to Landers for advice.

An American girl married a poor man and managed to see him through college with money she earned by manual work. After 18 years of married life, they had three kids. Now the husband has become better off and she, instead of going out to work, stays home to keep house. Every time, however, when she goes out to have her hair done at a hairdresser's, the man will be glum and silent for three days. The reason is, she is jobless and therefore has no right for a hairdo at his expense. So she wrote to Landers with this question, "What right have I as a jobless wife and mother?"

Landers wrote back to each of the two women, telling them how to best deal with the situations. But sometimes, unable to give a direct answer in her reply, she would instead resort to some witty or humorous remarks, thus generating even more letters from readers.

American young people often show a devil-may-care attitude towards problems of love and marriage. A reader wrote to tell the following little story. A fifth-grade pupil wrote in a composition on "monotony", a subject assigned by the teacher, "In America every man is supposed to have only one wife. That's what we mean by monotony."

Three Fables

© Shi Zhecun

(1)

The Scarecrow and the Hungry Hedgehogs

In a vegetable garden thickly planted with melons, beans and eggplants, stood a tall, upright man.

On the first night, the timid hedgehogs popped their heads out of the holes in the ground to see if there was any food available. They looked around and found they could enjoy a big dinner with the vegetables growing in the garden. But the trouble was there was a night watchman standing beside the eggplant patch. And they seemed to hear him bawling out a string of curses at them. So all they could do was shrink back to their narrow, damp cellar on an empty stomach.

On the second night, the hedgehogs came out stealthily again, their stomachs rumbling with hunger. They started drooling at the sight of the ripening melons, beans and eggplants. The tempting vegetables made their stomachs rumble even more loudly. But the watchman was still there. They pushed and shoved one another, trying furtively to get to the melon awning — a place nearest to them. Then, at a sudden gust of wind, the watchman stirred waving the fan in his hand. Shivering with fear, the hedgehogs all scurried back to their cellar.

On the third night, all the hedgehogs looked emaciated. Starvation impelled them to hold a meeting in the cellar.

Hedgehog A cried out, "Rather die than go hungry."

Hedgehog B cried out, "Rather die than go hungry."

Hedgehog C cried out, "Rather die than go hungry."

A resolution was adopted. They all set out, ready to risk death. In the dim moonlight, however, the watchman stood waving his fan with feigned impressiveness. So the hedgehogs cowered and stuck closely to their holes.

“Rather die than go hungry,” a strange voice suddenly began to ring in their little ears.

“Let’s go!”

When each hedgehog had eaten his fill of the melons, beans and eggplants, the watchman seemed all the more helpless.

Down in the cellar, the hedgehogs held a meeting to celebrate their victory.

Hedgehog A exclaimed, “Never fear worthless bigwigs!”

Hedgehog B exclaimed, “Victory to the starvelings!”

Hedgehog C exclaimed, “Starvelings will never die. No, never. They live forever.”

Thereupon, the crowd broke into an ovation.

(2)

The Thermometer

There was a thermometer hanging on the wall. The mercury dropped when it got cold, and rose when it got warm. It was operating with unerring accuracy.

People called it a good thermometer.

One day, however, it became skeptical of its own lifestyle. “Why should I act by always keeping pace with weather?” it thought aloud. “I’ll rise or drop as I please. I’ll take a rest whenever I want to. It seems I should follow my own inclination.”

So it decided on acting on its own, and no longer paid attention to weather.

It became a maverick on the wall.

Consequently, people called it trash and threw it away to the ground.

(3)

Wind · Fire · Coal · Mountain

There lived a blacksmith at the foot of a mountain. Every day he would stand working beside his blazing furnace.

One morning, when primary school pupils Zhang and Zhao were walking past the smithy on their way to school, they saw the blacksmith pumping a bellows to urge the fire in his furnace and blazing flames shooting up vigorously from under the coals.

A question popped into Zhang's little brain.

"Why is he using the bellows?" he asked.

Zhao asked in reply, "You silly, how could he make the fire burn better without using the bellows?"

Then they started quarrelling over this question: Which was more capable, wind or fire? Without wind, fire could not burn nicely. Without fire, wind would be blowing for nothing.

Unable to settle the quarrel, they asked the blacksmith to draw a conclusion.

"Neither wind nor fire would be any good if coals in the furnace didn't burn," said the blacksmith. "So coal has greater capability. But we would never have coal had it not been for the tree trunks and animal skeletons buried deep under mountains for hundreds or thousands of years. Now think it over and see which has greater capability."

Having heard out the story, the two kids walked away smilingly and gazed at the yonder bulky mountain.

"You're more capable," Zhang addressed the mountain. "Give us more coal from your deposits so that we can burn it with the help of wind."

"Let's enjoy seeing still more brilliant sparks flying out of the furnace," said Zhao.

My Private Library (Excerpt)

© Shao Xunmei^①

You may as well call me a bookworm. I have books everywhere in my home — in the drawing room and the bedroom, on either side of the staircase, and even in the bathroom on the third floor. So it's next to impossible for me to point out exactly where my study is. Maybe it's the room next to my bedroom. In the middle of it stands nothing but a desk piled high with lots of books so that there is practically no room for me to place my writing paper and the inkstone. The inkstone is indispensable to me because I always use a writing brush instead of a pen in doing my writing. I find the pen too slippery and moving a bit too fast, thus leaving little time for me to do more thinking. I prefer the writing brush because I can always keep pace with it. Though it sometimes may also move along a bit too fast, yet I can always catch up. There are only two armchairs in the room plus a bookcase holding my most favorite books, which are not to be borrowed by anybody. Hanging on the wall is a painting of narcissus done with light touches of ink imparting an air of moral superiority. Occasionally, while I am reading, I suddenly realize I'll soon face penury. Then the painting will cheer me up with bright hopes. On several nights, I just sat in this room staring at it blankly.

The little room is about 5 meters in length and 3 meters in width. I keep all books on modern poetry there. When the bookcase is full, I put them on the desk. When the desk is full, I pile them up on the chairs. When the chairs are full, I pile them up on the floor. I never sort them

① Shao Xunmei (1906-1968), an important publisher of modern literature, was himself a poet, an essayist, and a translator. And he was also regarded as a representative of estheticism in China.

out. I lay aside casually new acquisitions as well as books I've just finished reading. Consequently, it often takes me couple of hours to hunt down a book for reference when I am writing.

Generally speaking, with so many rooms for storing books, one will assign to each an elegant name, to be inscribed on a horizontal board hung above the door, partly for show and partly for convenience. I, nevertheless, have never been in a mood for doing the same. I just call the above-mentioned room "Upstairs Study", the room downstairs "Downstairs Study" and the bathroom on the third floor "Third-floor Study".

Since I usually read and write at night, you'll often find me sitting in the "Upstairs Study" because it is close to my bedroom. When I feel drowsy, I can easily reach my bed only a few steps away. But you'll find me in the spacious "Downstairs Study" instead when I'm to spend the whole night writing. There I can cough or strike a match without disturbing my folks in their sleep. At daybreak, I will heat up milk for myself or walk to an alley on the opposite side of the street to buy some fried bean curd for breakfast — all done without making a nuisance of myself. I'm seldom at home in the daytime. But, I'll start reading soon after I come back. Then I'll be suddenly interrupted by phone calls from editor-friends asking for my contributions. They know that I, out of compassion for editors, will never decline to dash off an article of two to three thousand words.

At any rate, I'm inseparable from my library. But none of my three studies makes me feel comfortable except when I'm completely absorbed in reading or writing. My ideal study should be roomy enough for holding twenty bookcases and have air-conditioning. And there should be a large desk there with enough space for books and writing paper to be jumbled up in piles on either side and for writing brush, inkstone, writing paper and so on to be placed in the middle. This is of course nothing but my wishful thinking. I have neither money to own such a roomy study, nor talent for creating masterpieces. Nevertheless, the extravagant hope brings me consolation all the same. It's sort of encouragement too.

But, anyway I can't work efficiently in the daytime. The "Upstairs Study" is too much lit up by the sun, so that I get a headache after staying

there a bit too long. And a thick window curtain would only make the room stuffy. The “Downstairs Study” is in fact a drawing room-cum-study. I have frequent visitors. When they call, I have to break off writing to the discomfort of both parties. I’m in the bad habit of finishing my article at one go like when I eat a meal. Once interrupted, I just can’t resume eating. Once, while writing an article on modern poetry, I was interrupted by a friend visiting. As a result, the article remains unfinished even today. Therefore, a newspaper editor would inevitably end up in trouble if he should entrust me with the job of writing a serialized novel for his supplement. But, when I write at night, the day seems to break sooner than I think. And one sleepless night will make me feel tired for three days on end and often suffer from a headache. When I go to see a doctor, he will just sigh with a frown. As to the “Third-floor Study”, a bed has now been placed there for my younger male cousin. So I seldom go there unless when I need a book.

In fact, I shouldn’t have complaints about my studies. Small as they are, they are tolerable. Since I moved to the present lodgings in the autumn of last year, I’ve produced writings, under my real name or a pseudonym, totaling about 150,000 words.

Hunger

© Xie Bingying^①

Believe it or not, I've been starving for four days on end.

At first, I ate nothing but four baked cakes or two small buns per day, then I cut them down by half and then by another half, until I didn't even own a copper for buying boiled water. When I was thirsty, I would stand under a tap and let its running water pour down my throat through my wide-open mouth. I felt bloated. There was a pain and chill in my stomach. I cannot tell you enough how miserable I was.

How did it come that I had been reduced to such poverty? It was because the school where I studied had got into trouble. Many students had been arrested and taken to the police station. Some students had moved house and some had gone home. The school canteen was closed because it refused to serve meals on credit. While trying to rescue the arrested fellow students, I meanwhile had to find enough money to pay my living expenses. So I was terribly busy.

Pressed by hunger, I would visit Chunchao Bookstore every day to seek a loan of money. When Kang Nong or Fu Hua was there, I would have no problem in borrowing a couple of silver dollars through them. But I seldom found them in the store and the clerks of course had no say in this matter. Therefore, in nine times out of ten nothing would come of my visit there.

I was beside myself with joy the day when I found my book *The Diary of a Woman Soldier* published at long last. Pasted up at the door of

① Xie Bingying (Xie Minggang, 1906-2000), first woman writer who had served in the army. Her prolific writing of novels, short stories, essays, letters, etc. covered 20 million Chinese characters. Her best known novel was *Autobiography of a Woman Soldier*.