

## Translator's Introduction

By Simon Schuchat

Zhang Henshui 張恨水, pen name of Zhang Xinyuan 張心遠 (1895–1967), was probably China's most popular novelist during his lifetime. Born in Anhui, he began his literary career as a journalist in Beijing, and eventually produced hundreds of works of fiction, most of which were initially written for newspaper serialization, often in Shanghai's popular *Xinwen bao* 新聞報 [News report]. Here we continue our excerpts from *Eighty-One Dreams* 八十一夢 (1943), his major contribution to the patriotic literature of resistance to Japan, which appeared in *Renditions* nos. 87 & 88 in 2017, with an additional five sections. Altogether, these represent slightly less than half of the entire book.

In 'There's a Way to Get Rich', the first dream presented here expands on Zhang's reportage of difficult living conditions, rampant profiteering, and corruption. He explains the thought processes of hoarding profiteers and the mechanics of smuggling, depicting the disturbing (to him, and no doubt to his readers as well) reversals of social status as truck drivers become more affluent than intellectuals.

In his dream 'A Peek at Dog Head Country', Zhang depicts the war time drug trade and mercilessly satirizes Chinese worshippers of all things foreign, for whom a beating from a foreigner is the best cure for a coughing fit, and whose prosperity rests on the living corpses of the drug-addicted poor.

A popular author whose language retained some of the flavour of traditional vernacular fiction (*huaben* 話本 or *zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小說), Zhang had a complicated relationship with China's anti-traditionalist May Fourth intellectuals such as Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897–1931), whom he parodies in the seventy-seventh dream. As he dreams of 'Winter in Beiping' twenty years earlier, he evokes the ideals of the student activists of the

period, sharing their sympathy for the poor and their outrage over the bullying behaviour of the rich and powerful, while criticizing their hypocrisy and their own yearning for wealth and power.

Finally, Zhang dreams of a glorious ‘Return to Nanjing’, the old K.M.T. capital, at the end of the war, where he encounters real estate speculation and a thriving *demi-monde*. Those who remained under Japanese or pro-Japanese puppet rule turn out to be not so different from those who ‘withdrew to the interior’ for the War of Resistance.

In a brief afterword, Zhang offers his own aesthetic and defends his work against its critics during its newspaper serialization in Chongqing during the war.

It has been suggested that powerful K.M.T. figures were offended by some of the thinly veiled satire. In particular, Finance Minister Kong Xiangxi 孔祥熙 (1880–1967) supposedly recognized himself in the attack on Japanese prime minister Prince Konoe Fumimaro 近衛文麿 (1891–1945) that appears in the eightieth dream, and compelled Zhang to cease publication.

The ‘dreams’ are rooted in solid reporting, despite their soft surreal transpositions and narrative structure. They reflect and illuminate the widespread dissatisfaction among the educated classes with the corrupt and inept K.M.T. regime, and foreshadow their eventual support for the Chinese Communists. Zhang shared that view, but remained clear-eyed—as the police chief in ‘Winter in Beiping’ warns him after his arrest at the meeting of student activists, once the students take over, they will likely be more repressive than the war-lords of the 1920s.

The so-called ‘Butterfly School’, of which Zhang was the leading exemplar, never provided mere entertainment, but also demonstrated a social conscience in opposition to injustice. Unlike Zhang’s other famous novels such as *Fate in Tears and Laughter* 啼笑因緣 (1930) or *A Family of Distinction* 金粉世家 (1932), *Eighty-One Dreams* has no romantic plot or—other than the author—central characters, and, while there are echoes from chapter to chapter, its overall structure is anecdotal, loose, and casual. Nevertheless, it is—and is considered by Chinese critics to be—one of Zhang’s ‘representative works’, as well as among his finest.

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