廢名：小說兩篇
Two Stories

By Fei Ming
Translated by Andrew F. Jones

竹林的故事
The Story of the Bamboo Grove

Beyond the city wall to the river, across the river to the west, and below the embankment is a thicket of bamboo, and half-hidden amidst the bamboo grove, a thatched cottage with vegetable plots growing on either side. Twelve years ago, the owner of the cottage was a peaceable man everybody called Old Cheng.

In those days, we had brought in a schoolmaster to the village shrine just to teach Liaofan's *Outline and Mirror*.[1] Since we liked to go to the plots to pick vegetables, we came to know Old Cheng. Old Cheng had a little girl, unusually shy, but who liked to smile. Later on, the vegetable picking was just an excuse for us to clown around for her. At first we didn't even know her name, and when we finally asked, she would just smile without saying a word. Once, when we heard Old Cheng call her 'Ah San', I took her hand and said, 'Haha, so you must be the third girl.' From then on, we called her 'Miss San'. By rights, Miss San ought to have had brothers or sisters, but aside from her father and mother, we never saw anyone else around.

One day our teacher wasn't at home, so we hung about in front idly tossing around shards of old roof tiles. Old Cheng's wife happened to walk by clutching some incense paper, and not long after, we watched as she came back, not quite

[1] This slightly inexact reference likely refers to the exhortatory Ming-dynasty text on history, ethics, and statecraft by Yuan Liaofan 袁了凡 (1533–1606), the full title being *Lishi dafang gangjian bu* 歷史大方綱鑑補 [Supplement to the historical great outline and mirror].

directly along the same path as before, but turned toward us with a forced smile. 'Teachers, help me read this divination slip!' We gathered around to read the quatrain by the Bodhisattva and asked, 'What are you praying for?' She spoke of a long litany of problems, and that was the first time we learned that Ah San had had two older sisters, and that if Old Cheng's wife could only hold on to this one daughter, without being troubled by frequent afflictions, it would be all that she could desire.

Besides growing vegetables, Old Cheng caught fish to sell. In April and May, after the incessant rains, when the mountains filled the stream, he would take his fishing gear to a grassy pier. It was the same pier where Old Cheng's wife washed their clothes, protected from the sun's rays by the interleaved shade of a tree to the side, making for a natural gazebo. The water was high, and the rock she used to scrub their clothes was beneath the surface, while the round green mound of the pier jutted out from above it, barely above the water. Old Cheng looked as if he was riding in a rowboat as he stood on the mound and slid his net back and forth through the water—back and forth until he made a catch, at which point he would, without moving his feet, wheel behind him to drop the fish in a little pen that had already been dug for that purpose. Miss San's little hands would begin to dance along with her happy, excited cries until she was finally able to grab hold of the thrashing fish. Then she would sit back down on the grass and continue to watch her father.

Amidst the murmuring of the current, the net jutted out from the water, and water drops splattered down into the water below, while the stream rushing through the tree branches immersed under the surface made a swishing sound. Miss San gradually forgot that her father was standing there, as she kept shovelling dirt, and was even softly humming a tune; when her hair tumbled down over her eyes, she raised her head, catching sight of the foamy bubbles atop the water. Excited for a moment, they quickly disappeared, and when she tilted her head to one side her sight was blocked by the leaves of the trees—and her eyes came back round to her father's side, with a sudden '*Aiya*!'—this time it's a big fish! And Mama came walking along the embankment, saying that there wasn't enough salt in the salt crock for supper.

When Old Cheng came back from town, there was wood smoke rising from the roof of the thatched cottage. With a shout, he scared away the hog who had been furtively rooting around in the vegetable plot—and Miss San also emerged

from inside, as Old Cheng produced a handful of bright-red ribbons from his pouch: 'Ah San, will these do for your braids?' Miss San clutched them in one hand, and, taking the wine-pot with the other, made straight for the stove. 'Save them for hanging up mugwort for the Dragon Boat Festival, don't ruin them!' Mama said, and placed the wine-pot by the burner to warm. Miss San went into the room, came out again, and when she saw mother gathering the chopsticks, hastened to fetch the cup—there was only one in the house and it was always Miss San's job to look after it—and stood on her tiptoes to set it on the table. But her father still had to push it further toward the centre of the table, and only then picked up the wine-pot. 'Papa, drink your wine, I'll have the dried bean curd.' Old Cheng didn't want any snacks to help down his wine; he sat across from Miss San, slowly drinking.

At the age of eight, Miss San was already able to take over the washing for her mother. But there was no longer any trace of Old Cheng on that rounded green pier—one needed only to look across the bamboo grove, to where the embankment sloped down to the sand-flats, to see the barren earthen mound in the shape of the ruler that schoolmasters (naturally not our teacher) use, in front of which stand three or four bamboo poles, not yet shorn of all their branches, with the dangling remains of paper streamers, sodden and tangled together by the rain, to know what it meant.

Old Cheng's wife was already forty, and even under normal circumstances had only coarse blue clothes to wear. Dispensing merely with the pale-red straps she had used to fasten her shoes, she hardly looked different at all. Only the white cloth covering the dark tips of Miss San's green floral-patterned shoes, even though they looked even prettier, made people go as quiet as Miss San herself whenever they caught sight of them.

Yet this could not last forever. Both mother and daughter were clever and hard-working, and with the arrival of spring, their circumstances, like the little world around them, brightened day by day, as the bamboo in the grove and the vegetables in the plot turned a lovely green. Old Cheng's death, conversely, began to fade, until it was only when the sparrowhawks circled the roof that Miss San's mother said, 'Go on, go check on the hatchlings down on the flat,' and Miss San, walking past the thicket of bamboo, knew that it was Papa who was sleeping there. Later still, the grass blanketed everything, and it seemed that even the matter of there having once been a father was no more.

In the second month of the lunar year, the townsfolk competed for the best dragon lanterns, and the streets and lanes teemed with crowds of people. Most of them were women, whirling in from all the surrounding villages like little tornadoes, older girls linking hands with the younger ones, trooping from one street to the other, and the men took the opportunity to try to bump up against their breasts. But would you ever see Miss San or Miss San's mother among them? No, not a single time! The gongs and drums ringing out failed to bring mother and daughter out from home, just as they never startled the sparrows from the bamboo grove. When the time came for the hens to be put up in the coops, the cousins-in-law who lived further to the west and below the embankment stopped by to ask 'Third Sister' to come out, and she always declined with a smile. Mama did her utmost to encourage her to go with them; as Miss San walked them all as far as the embankment, Mama also came out to see if, after being pestered awhile, Miss San would indeed go, but the others moved gradually into the distance, while her daughter stuck like a shadow to her side.

Miss San's refusal was after all quite natural, and Mama's expression a little strange! She cast an inquiring glance at Mama's face—who was glancing back at her, and so she turned her head and gazed in the direction her cousins-in-law were walking: 'What's there to look at? Walking in a knot like that, like they are crazy!'

She had wanted to liven Mama up with this, but Mama's face showed that she was still in low spirits. The river had gone dry, just an expanse of sand, so the embankment looked from afar like a winding snake, and the people standing atop it seemed even smaller, like black specks. From here, the semicircle of the city wall looked so low that it almost seemed to slant down into the ground; the wooden bridge was exactly like those in paintings she had seen, while the strand wriggled as they moved back and forth. You could count the people on the embankment, but as soon as you looked at the crowds on the strand, all sense of scale was lost, and they seemed as blurry and indistinct as trees on a distant mountain slope. The hubbub of the crowd was even clearer than if one was to stand closer, and though there was no way to tell what was being said, the voices immediately drew one in. The bamboo grove was as it always had been, the swallows playing their evening song, although for those accustomed to them, this only heightened the sense of quiet.

It was her mama who broke the stillness.

'Ah San! Even if I was dead, I wouldn't be afraid of the cats coming to wake me up. So why do you always have to watch over me? After all …'

Mama fell silent, and Miss San seemed apologetically uneasy, and with the suddenness of the reproach, everything that had just happened seemed to have been borne away on the wind, giving her the strength to retort:

'After all! After all what? I just don't like having fun!'

All of Miss San's quarrels with Mama came from her being too good, like how every morning when she got up she dusted the furniture, but Mama said, 'We're just country folks, is that really necessary?' On the occasions when they went out, she sat by the mirror and simply combed the hair away from her forehead, while Mama insisted on taking an embroidered flower out of a box for her to wear. Now that they were standing on the embankment, her tears about to burst forth, Mama didn't make a sound. Mama was the one the circumstances were the hardest on. She knitted her brows and gazed steadily at Miss San without looking away, yet Miss San wouldn't lift up her head. Not until the lamp on the table was lit did she realize they were back in the thatched cottage, and the time in between had been a dream.

All at once the lamp lit up Miss San, holding a sheaf of rice straw and a vegetable basket full of cabbages that she had just harvested along with Mama after their meal and sitting on the bench to tie them up into bundles of three.

'Mama, these are much bigger than before. Two of them might even add up to more than a pound.'

Mama hadn't imagined that the vegetables for sale tomorrow morning would already be piled inside. Miss San didn't need Mama's help, and in the end, Mama sighed without a word and sat with her as she bundled.

Miss San wouldn't go to town to see the lanterns, but in years past she had sat astride her father's back to see them many times, so when she heard the drums and gongs resound from inside the city walls, she could paint a picture in her head of what the scene would be like. 'Next they'll arrive at the East Gate, and after that they'll collect the awards in front of the yamen …' Pondering the place the sound was coming from, she talked to herself as she guessed how far they had gone. When Mama had just married, she loved the excitement as well, and perhaps she remembered those scenes even more clearly than Miss San, but in response to the delight Miss San took in being almost there, she could only

mutter an occasional 'yes'—and Miss San, quizzical, stretched, 'And just now you were urging me to go join the fun!'

Miss San stood up, and counted out the bundles—one, two, three, four—putting them one after another in the basket, ready to sell at market first thing in the morning.

Catching sight of Miss San vigorously shouldering a carrying pole of vegetables, one might wonder why she hadn't had the spirit to show her dark, beautiful, oval face in the lantern light the previous night. No—if anyone wondered, it was only her mother. When people saw Miss San carrying her produce, they saw Miss San and Miss San's vegetables, and never called anything else to mind, because if they hesitated for a second, they wouldn't be able to buy any of them; Miss San's cabbages were that good, and even without being soaked overnight, they would cook up bigger and sweeter to the taste than any of the others.

I lived in the village shrine for six whole years, and the last impression I have of Miss San from that time was of her selling her vegetables.

By that time, Miss San was already a girl of twelve or thirteen, and since it was the height of summer, she was wearing a light cotton tunic, pale as the colour of the moon—naturally it was old and worn, but it could hardly have been as flattering if it was new, though it was hard to say for sure since we had never seen Miss San wearing new clothes: in short, Miss San was just plain good-looking. For us, Miss San was as familiar a sight as our teacher, with the difference being that if we caught sight of the teacher we would scamper inside, while if we saw Miss San coming, we would find ourselves just standing and smiling. Yet Miss San was so quiet and tranquil that as she approached, all our clowning would gradually die down, and by the time we had selected some vegetables from her basket and taken some bronze coins out from our wallets to give her, we would feel immensely apologetic, as if we had committed some kind of grave sin against her. Miss San, for her part, was quite used to all of this, and would take our money and shoulder her basket.

One day Miss San was selling green peppers. Peppers had just come back in season, and we were planning to buy four *liang* to cook along with a fresh fish—what could be more delicious? Miss San was weighing them out with her hand-scale, and everyone was in high spirits, with some suggesting that we get a carp, and some arguing that carp is not as tasty as bream. One of the most mischievous boys among us said:

'Miss San, weigh out an extra *liang*, and when it's ready, you can come join us for dinner, what do you say?'

Miss San laughed.

'Can't I eat a meal with you gentlemen without having to chip in?'

We all burst into laughter, but before we could be on our guard, Miss San had grabbed another handful and added them to the pile of peppers that had already been weighed.

'Miss San can't eat with us—her Mama's waiting at home to eat. And we don't have any way to thank her, except to hope that in the future she finds a nice husband.'

That is what I said. And then Miss San ran away.

I never saw Miss San again. Until this year, when I came back from afar for the Qingming grave-sweeping ceremony, and on a misty day, thinking to go outside the city to watch people burn incense in offering, walked onto the embankment, and caught sight of the bamboo grove in the distance. My memories, like a pool of spring water, wrinkled in the breeze. As I lingered, two women walked up the little path from the grove to the embankment. One of the two stood still, while the other, in the front, continued to walk as she said something in reply, and I immediately recognized her as Miss San!

'Third Cousin, how busy you are! As if the Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-Autumn weren't enough, you're making a meal for the ancestors, before you've even eaten yourself!'

I could hear the woman's words quite distinctly.

And then there was no other sound: Miss San's shoes stepping across sandy soil. I was longing to look around the bamboo grove, but stood still for a moment, facing the flowing water, to allow Miss San, head lowered, to pass.

Written in October 1924

Superfluous Addendum

Recently one or two friends have said that it's easy to know that my writings are mine, meaning that they lack breadth. I admit it, but I don't want to change, because though I could write in other ways, I would take no interest in it, as it is only in this sort of thing that I find so much interest. Kuriyagawa Hakuson's interpretation of Baudelaire's 'Windows' is I think the best explanation of what

I do when I write.[2] Yet I fear Chinese readers will not derive the same pleasure that I have from them, and this is why a friend has given me another nickname: 'the widow looking after an orphan'. It's easy to recognize children born to the same mother, naturally, and so when it comes to lacking breadth, there's nothing that can be done.

17 January

[2] The reference here is to Charles Baudelaire's (1821–1867) 'Les Fenêtres', from his *Le Spleen de Paris* [Paris spleen] (1869). Fei Ming encountered this prose poem and its interpretation by the Japanese literary critic Kuriyagawa Hakuson 厨川白村 (1880–1923) in Lu Xun's 魯迅 (1881–1936) translation of Kuriyagawa's *Kumon no shōchō* [Symbols of anguish], which had just appeared as a monograph one month before the postscript was written, in December 1924. In 1925, Fei Ming later included his own translation of Baudelaire's poem as a preface to his first collection of short stories, *The Story of the Bamboo Grove*.