

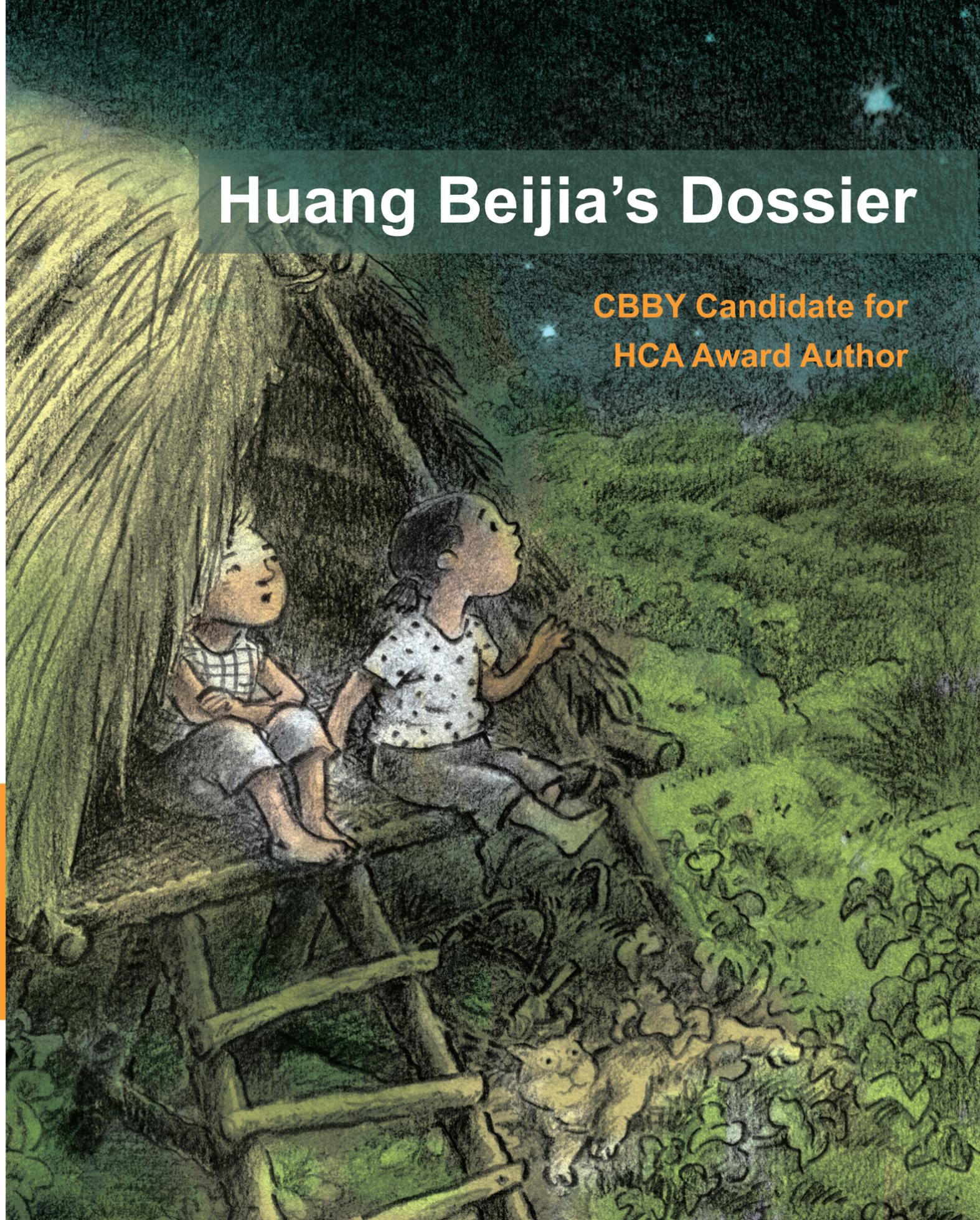
I hope to use literature as a way to present the past in a very concrete way so that children can understand their family, clan, hometown, nation, and country.

To face reality and history directly, accurately describing and restoring the scenes with voices, temperature, and breath is a way of showing respect to children and to literature.

—— Huang Beijia

# Huang Beijia's Dossier

**CCBY Candidate for  
HCA Award Author**



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黃若蘭

Biographical

information



# Huang Beijia

## Biographical information



Huang Beijia was born in Rugao, an ancient city in China's Jiangsu Province. Rugao, located at the intersection of many rivers, has a long history and a great agricultural production. There, Huang Beijia spent a humble childhood: at that time, new clothes, a few balloons, or even a hair clip were things that children could only dream of. Fortunately, Huang Beijia's parents were well-regarded teachers in the local county, cultured people. Besides, their school had a library, so Huang Beijia had more opportunities to read than other children of her age.

When she grew up, Huang Beijia told the following story.

One day, many years ago, as the sun set below the horizon, a tall, slender



girl with long arms and legs sat all curled up in the doorway to an old house. She was wearing long, blue-cotton trousers and a purple, floral jacket. She had a full, straight fringe hanging over her forehead. On her knees was a big, thick novel. Because of the setting sun, she was narrowing her eyes. Her skin was yellowish like the sunshine, but with a somewhat jaundiced sheen. This was during the Great Chinese Famine, so there's no doubt that the girl was malnourished.

That evening, her aunt came from the long-distance bus station to visit the girl's family. In the same instant that her aunt appeared in front of her, blocking the sun, the girl raised her head, not looking surprised in the slightest. She closed the book, letting her aunt look at the cover. Then she asked, "Have you read it?"

That girl sitting all curled up in the doorway was Huang Beijia. Back then she was just seven years old, in the second grade.

When she grew up, her aunt would often bring up this anecdote. She'd laugh and say, "Beijia has always been such a bookworm! The very first time I took a long-distance bus to visit her family, she saw me and didn't even greet me. Instead, she held up a book and quizzed me about it!"

And that's exactly how things had gone.

Reading allowed Huang Beijia to have an extremely rich inner world. By contrast, all those things—the clothes, balloons, and hair clips—didn't matter to her at all. These things came way after books.

Reading also opened up new horizons for her: she realized that the world wasn't just that small city she lived in. There was a wider world out there, waiting for her to explore it and discover it.

In 1977, Huang Beijia was admitted to one of China's top universities becoming a Chinese Literature student at Beijing University. It was there that she got to know the country's most promising people, studying literature, aesthetics, philosophy, and artistic theory. At the same time, she began experimenting with her first literary creations. Standing in the middle of the Beijing University Library, surrounded by all those books, Huang Beijia was often overcome with joy. Apart from her lessons, she spent the rest of her time in that temple dedicated to literature where she voraciously read literary classics from around the world. Sometimes she asked herself, "Didn't I read this book when I was a child?" Then she buried her head in it, pressing her forehead against the pages and inhaling the musty smell of old paper. In the bottom of her heart, she felt the wild joy of a reunion with an old friend. It was during this time that she wrote the short stories *When Reed Boats Float*, *Small Boats*, and *A Tu* which are still beloved by readers today.

In 1984, Huang Beijia left her temporary job at the Jiangsu Provincial Department of Foreign Affairs to join the Jiangsu Writers Association and



become a professional writer. She wasn't even thirty years old when she entered the Creative Youths Team, a team of high-spirited and ambitious young authors. Writing went from something Huang did in her spare time to a full-time profession. Until today, her works for children and adults amount to almost five million words. From being unknown, Huang Beijia became a famous writer throughout China, all the while serving as vice-chairman of the Jiangsu Writers Association.

She herself has said, "In the blink of an eye, more than thirty years have passed. I'm horrified to find that I have passed middle age and, step by step, am moving into old age. I've read many books, travelled far away, and also written numerous works, but I have not yet reached my original goals. Although I still have some time left, I'm afraid that this epoch no longer belongs to us. But I keep writing just like before. I do so because I'm intoxicated by words, by characters and stories, and by the loneliness of writing."

As a writer of both adult and children's literature, Huang Beijia's works have marked an epoch in China. She has lived for short periods in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Australia, and Spain. Huang has visited more than thirty countries in Asia, Europe, North and South America, and Africa. There, she has made speeches and shared ideas with numerous writers and translators. In recent years, she has appeared as a representative of Chinese writers at international book fairs like the Seoul International Book Fair in South Korea, the Thessaloniki Book Fair in Greece, and the Leipzig Book Fair in Germany. Popular among millions of readers, her works have been translated into various languages. One can say that her works are international but, at the same time, have a local flavor to them. Her far-reaching international influence is the result of her deep love and her infinite creativity.

黄蓓佳

Contribution to literature  
for young people



# Huang Beijia's contribution to literature for young people

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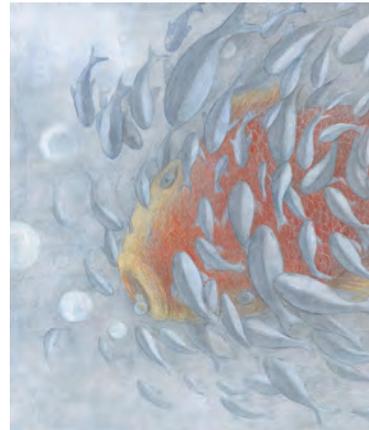
Huang Beijia is one those rare authors in China who has found success in writing for both children and adults. What's more surprising is that her creations in both of these fields have completely different styles. However, they share the same level of praise and admiration from critics and readers.

In her decades of writing for children, she has made contributions in three main areas:

## 1) Huang Beijia's works present a panoramic view of the lives of Chinese children.

Over the past three decades, Huang Beijia has become the epitome of Chinese children's literature. In the world's most populous country, her works have reached nearly four hundred millions of young readers. The sentimental, profound, and talented strokes of her writing have captured the lives of China's children.

For example, *I Will Be a Good Child*, the long children's novel published in 1996, won her a good reputation as a writer. It tells the story of Jin Ling, a little girl in the sixth grade, the last year of primary school. This book posed a crucial question to both the teachers and parents: what makes a child "good"? Is a kind, honest, and caring girl like Jin Ling a good child even though she has bad grades? In the 1990s, when China





entered the period of Reform and Opening Up, education gradually went back on the right track. At the same time, because of the dense population in this country, Chinese children had to compete against each other. It was as if a thousand soldiers tried to cross a wooden bridge with a single lane: only the very best students could enter a university of their choice and embark upon a future that would satisfy their parents and teachers.



Having only one path to success, a warped value system, and a heavy academic burden puts children, parents, and teachers under a great deal of pressure. Huang Beijia's novel offers a clear answer to this dilemma. The criteria for being a "good child" can be diverse. Borrowing the voice of its protagonist, Jin Ling, the novel resounds with the aspiration to be "a good child." At the time of its release, the novel led to a wide discussion on the education system and its purpose: it called for loving and respecting children and spurred a group of writers who started to pay attention to education and reflect on how children grow up.

As another example, 2010 happened to be the thirtieth anniversary of the implementation of the One-Child Policy. This policy is one of a kind in the world, so it has received global attention since its inception. It is also an area of debate explored by policy-making institutions, sociologists, economists, and pedagogical researchers alike. The Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd. planned to publish a book to "remember a childhood with brothers and sisters." Huang Beijia took up this idea, and told the story of past childhoods through the eyes of Aiwan. *Aiwan's Daffodils* passionately tells the only children of today how flowers used to bloom and how wind chimes used to ring. Growing up should be a happy thing, but it is also difficult. You have to take it step by step, one experience at a time, before you can step over life's threshold and see the bright future that lies ahead.



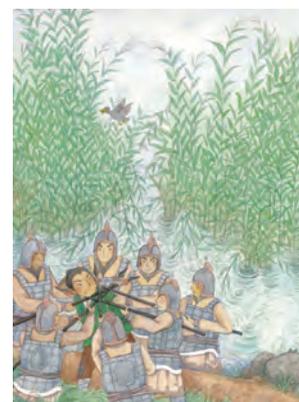
The same literary successes can be seen in her other works, such as *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat*, *A Kiss for Mom*, *Through the Eyes of a Child*, *Flight of the Bumblebee*. In decades of non-stop writing, Huang Beijia has neither shown the slightest fear, nor repeated herself. Each of her books has provided theorists and readers with a new vision, inspiring generation after generation of children.

## 2) Huang Beijia is one of the few among China's renowned writers who is willing to attempt multi-genre writing.

Like Cao Wenxuan, Huang Beijia is a household name in China. In Chinese families, grandparents, parents, and children are all her readers. The main reason for this is that Huang Beijia is one of the few authors in China who takes pleasure to write in multiple genres. Her works not only have captured the hearts of children between three and fifteen years of age, but are also suitable for the whole family.

Her long children's novels include *I Will Be a Good Child*, *I'm a Flag Raiser Today*, *I'm Flying*, *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat*, *A Kiss for Mom*, *You're My Baby*, *Aiwan's Daffodils*, and *Through the Eyes of a Child*. All of them are masterpieces.

She has also written the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series*, which contains the short novels *Grass Bracelet*, *White Cotton Flower*, *Sing-Sing-So*, *Black Eyes*, and *Christmas Eve*. These truly heartfelt and touching works connect the lives of five children, outlining the vicissitudes of Chinese history in the past century. In essence, Huang Beijia's works are an ode to childhood.





Aside from these popular novels, Huang Beijia has also written around one hundred short stories and essays divided among various collections such as *Small Boats*, *Ninety-Eight Double Red Rings*, *Auntie*, *You Lived Here*, and *The Most Gentle Eyes*. Some of these stories have been included in Chinese language textbooks.

Huang Beijia has also studied the works of Italo Calvino and conducted thorough research into Chinese fairy tales. Out of the hundreds and thousands of stories, she selected the classics that had the widest reach and greatest artistic value. In 2004, she compiled them in the collection *Chinese Fairy Tales*. This book has been recognized as a real literary achievement.

She has also written over twenty picture books for young children. These include the ones she published with the collaboration of ten illustrators in 2012: *The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl*, *The Beautiful Brocade*, *The Hunter Hai Libu*, *Flowers and Youth*, *Fairy in the Orange*, *The Snake Groom*, *Children of Lugu Lake*, *Little Fisherman and the Princess Baojing*, *Happy Riverside Child*, and *Jade Grasshopper*. She has also authored the original picture books *The Little Man in the Mirror*, *The Moon on the Eaves*, *Caesar's Little Sister*, and *The Most Gentle Eyes*. Huang Beijia has also collaborated with the famous illustrator Zhu Chengliang on the picture book *Snowflakes Falling*.

This diversity of genres has won Huang Beijia a wide audience. Many of her works sell exceedingly well upon their first release, and her books have been praised as perennial favorites suitable for the whole family to read together.



### 3) Huang Beijia holds extensive, in-depth literary and social activities.

In addition to writing, Huang Beijia also engages with her readers in non-commercial activities. For more than thirty years, she has used the two communication platforms for writers, the Humanities Campus and the Dandelion Village Reading Program to reach more than three hundred schools across the country including migrant children's schools, special education schools, and primary schools in remote townships. There, she has held lectures on literature and helped students with their studies. She has also recited Emily Dickinson's poems and Jorge Luis Borges's essays to the children, telling them that "a book is like a ship or horse that can take you to distant places" and that "heaven is a library."

Huang Beijia is a member of the Children's Literature Committee of the Chinese Writers Association. She is a consultant to several important children's magazines and research institutions. She is often invited to speak at seminars on children's literature and international literature. At the annual meetings of the Children's Literature Committee of the Chinese Writers Association, when judging the recipients of major



literary awards, she always sticks to the basic principles of an outstanding writer, promoting practical and effective works for children. Since 2016, four studios named in her honor have been established in Nanjing and Suzhou.

Since 2017, Huang Bejia has planned and edited a large-scale series of original children's literature, *The Glorious Ages*, which will be published in one hundred volumes. The first collection of twenty volumes will be published in June 2019.

Like the famous writer Cao Wenxuan, Huang Bejia has won many important literary awards, far more than other children's authors in China. Some of these honors have been awarded by readers, while others have been given to her by expert panels. The scope of these awards indicates that her works have a large readership and have been recognized by experts in both literature and art.

#### 4) Huang Bejia enjoys great social prestige and international influence.

Huang Bejia is a hardworking, prolific writer with more than one hundred publications in multiple editions. Her novel *I Will Be a Good Child* has been reprinted more than three hundred times and has sold over five million copies since its publication in 1996. This is quite a significant number in China's contemporary publishing industry. Huang Bejia's works have always been best sellers; as such, they have often appeared on prize lists for China's most important literary awards.

Just like her adult literary works, *Parker-style Revolver* and *New Gone with the Wind*, her children's novel *I Will Be a Good Child* has been

adapted into a film. The films, television programs and theatrical plays based on these works have won awards at the International Television Festival, along with the Golden Box Award, the China Film Award, and the China Television Drama Apsara Award.

More than ten of Huang Beijia's works have been included in both official and unofficial Chinese language textbooks. As everyone knows, Chinese textbooks have very strict requirements regarding the pieces included, which must be enduring classics.

In terms of her international influence, Huang Beijia is not only one of the first Chinese writers to export the rights, but she is also among those who have sold the most international rights. The publishing rights of forty-six of her works have been sold to countries like France, Switzerland, South Korea, and Vietnam, amongst others.

In 2002, the French publishing house Éditions Philippe Picquier purchased the EU rights to *I Will Be a Good Child*. This French publisher was very optimistic about this work, launching not only a standard C4-size edition but also a pocket one in response to market demand. This represents a strong recognition for an internationally acquired book, both at the time and today.

At the 2008 Switzerland Literary Festival and the Leipzig Book Fair in Germany, readers not only expressed a strong love for Huang Beijia's works, but also a deep appreciation for her elegant and thoughtful speech. At the press conference during the Seoul International Book Fair in South Korea, Huang Beijia made a keynote speech entitled "I Hope My Works Can Enter the Hearts of Korean Children," which garnered an enthusiastic response from readers and local media. Korean media



commented that Huang Beijia is one of China's most endearing writers. At the 2009 Thessaloniki Book Fair, Huang Beijia, acting on behalf of Chinese writers, read an extract from her new work, *Family Members*, for the audience.

In 2012, *Aiwan's Daffodils* was selected to be part of the publishing program Thirty Works in One Hundred Years of Chinese Children's Literature. This program was undertaken by Borim Press in South Korea, and was one of the first batches of books to be printed. At the 2013 Beijing International Book Fair, Borim Press released a special promotional film focused on Huang Beijia's works. The president of Borim Press said that their narrative style resonates deeply with readers. Through her works, children in South Korea can learn about the lives of children in China, which is very meaningful.

María Jesús Gil, President of the 2014 Hans Christian Andersen Award Jury, visited Phoenix Juvenile and Children’s Publishing Ltd. for a literary exchange meeting, where she had a warm and productive discussion with Huang Beijia. Ms. Gil expressed a high appreciation for Huang Beijia’s works.

It is difficult for this brief piece to present Huang Beijia’s rich and splendid literary career in its entirety, but it is perhaps enough to outline her tireless pursuit and unending love of literature. The following is a quote from Huang Beijia, in response to the just and arduous work of the judges:

“Writing has become my life; no other career in the world is more appealing or suitable to me. Writing is undoubtedly a kind of thread—long, slender and continuous—that stretches out from my heart. If there was a next life, then I would still be a writer.”



Selected Illustrations from Huang Beijia’s Books

黃蓓佳

Essay and interview





## Who Do I Care So Much About?

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The first time I wrote children's literature was in 1978. I had written before, but always for adults.

That year, I began my studies in the Chinese Department of Beijing University. It was also the year the nightmare of the Cultural Revolution came to an end and the new era of Reform and Opening Up began. Both my world view and my literary view underwent fundamental changes with my new life in the new era, and I became immersed in a spirit of unrest and did

not quite know how to continue. Just as I was attempting to change my method of creation, I received a letter from the editor of *Jiangsu's Youth Literature and Arts*, Gu Xianmo, and so I wrote the children's story *Starry Night* for him.

The story was published very soon after that, and it received an award from Jiangsu Province. Mr. Gu followed up with an enthusiastic letter encouraging me to write more children's literature. The second piece I sent him was an essay, *Makeup Party*, and it was likewise published almost immediately. In this way, one step at a time, I became a regular contributor to *Jiangsu's Youth Literature and Arts*.

Mr. Gu sent me a letter roughly every ten days. He was never stingy with praise,



always speaking highly of my work without reservation. At the time, I was young, and young people do not know how to handle praise. If readers liked my work and editors appreciated it, and in addition it even received some small award, my spirits rose like mercury in a thermometer when measuring the temperature of a fevered body. I wrote day and night, forgetting everything else. I forgot classes and exams, just as I forgot winter or summer vacations. Sometimes I would send two articles to the same issue of a publication, one under my own name and one under a pen name.

Today, I often come across some parents in their forties who, as they accompany their children to buy a copy of my latest work, tell me with great emotion, “When I was young, I grew up with your novels.” At such times, I cannot help but feeling a tremor in my heart, an emotion arising deep inside me. The world is so big, and finding mutual understanding between people is simply a matter of fate. *Jiangsu’s Youth Literature and Arts* was a link. It bound me intimately to the readers, allowing me a greater harvest than what I had sown. On life’s lonely road, whenever I remember that someone is reading and loving my work, I feel gratitude beyond words.



After graduating from Beijing University, I moved back to Jiangsu, where I started working and created a family. I entered the Jiangsu Writers Association, becoming a professional writer. Mr. Gu Xianmo retired, and I did not continue writing children’s literature.

Another decade passed. I wrote short stories, novellas, novels, essays, and articles for adult readers. I wrote screenplays for films, and also for television. I occasionally recalled the days when I had sweated in my dorm room at university, rushing to meet a deadline for Youth Literature and Arts, and it seemed a bit like a dream.

In 1996, my daughter started middle school. As a mother, I experienced a war over entering school with my child, which can be considered cruel. (At that time, primary-school kids were admitted to middle schools of different grade based on

their results.) When exams had finished, we buried the hatchet. As I was sorting through the study materials and mock exams that had accumulated in our home, I felt an ache in my heart. Did our children have to struggle to enter life like this? Was it necessary for them to win all the battles, going through a bloodbath before they could earn a certificate to enter society?

I ran a sort of informal survey among my friends and colleagues regarding this issue. I received consistent agreement and encouragement to write a novel about it.

This led me to spend the next twenty days or so writing *I Will Be a Good Child*. I wrote roughly four thousand words a day. Considering that I was a middle-aged homemaker, this was an incredible, mad pace of writing. And it was not me flying at this pace. It was the words, the characters, and the story that were pulling me along. It was the life of my daughter, the life of our family, and her life at school. The content

was completely familiar, so it did not require much arranging or imagination. I had merely to sit at my desk and countless vivid scenes rushed to the tip of my pen in a smooth, unstoppable flow.

Once the novel was completed, it was published at top speed, perhaps just a month later. I remember that I decided to start writing the story in December, and just after the Spring Festival, I had a beautiful sample of the book in my hands. My daughter was the first to read it. She was reading about herself. She even read it three or four times, and as she read, her mouth opened in a smile. She enjoyed reading it on her own. Later, I heard other children exclaim on several occasions, “Jin Ling is like me. How did you know about my situation?”

Of course I did not know them. I knew my daughter. She was one of the thousands of children I was dedicating this story to, so when I wrote about her, I was naturally also



writing about them.

Like before, the story was warmly received by editors and readers, and also generated an incredible enthusiasm. I continued writing, producing *I'm a Flag Raiser Today*, *I'm Flying*, *A Kiss for Mom*, *You're My Baby*, and the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series* all in rapid succession. I was pleasantly surprised to find that I still had a feel for writing children's literature, and I still felt the same joy I had years before. I hoped I could fly again.

My own requirement for writing children's literature is to capture both joy and sorrow, or rather to capture joy and real thought. If it is not interesting, it won't work, but neither will it work if it's only amusing. I want my words and my characters to linger in the children's mind, to be recalled even many years later. When they remember their childhood, I want them to recall the warmth of my stories and how they moved them.

I always ask myself, "Did I achieve it?"

Life is so rich, and while writing, I enjoy the process of life. On countless occasions, when I draw the world for a child with



my pen, I become a covert member of that world, breathing the air that the characters breathe, overhearing their conversations, feeling their pain, and finally flying with them. I can understand children's joy and sorrow. There is a secret psychological connection between me and them. Once I am transformed, I can move in and out through that passage. I am often asked how I figure out the psychology of a child. I think it's a strange question. Why should I figure it out? I don't need to figure it out, because my characters and I are one. We know each other, and we think and feel the same things.

The charm of writing is that every book is a life, a face, and a set of dreams. Once I've written a book, I've lived vicariously through many of my characters, and I have enjoyed it. My own life has been increasingly enriched through this process.

Who do I care so much about? Who is it I have not met and am constantly dreaming of? It is my dear readers, and my dear children. If I wander away from their gaze

and their encouragement, my heart will be empty and desolate.

More than thirty years have passed since 1978. That's a long time, but in living it, it felt quite short. In fact, it's been so short that I can still see myself in little braids, scampering to the post office to send the manuscript.

Of the novels I mentioned earlier, *I Will Be a Good Child*, *I'm a Flag Raiser Today*, and *A Kiss for Mom* have all won numerous national-level awards and been accepted in the list of required books drawn up by educational departments and publishing houses, but my personal favorite is *I'm Flying*. In the postscript of this novel, I wrote that, after I clicked the "Save" button on my computer on the final day, I sat in front of the window under the winter sun, feeling boundless purity and light. I was suddenly reluctant to leave my two children: Shan Mingming and Du Xiaoya. They were like countless other characters in my writing, just passing through my life, laughing and crying with me for a few months, then disappearing without a trace. All that was left inside of me was joy, a joy laced with sorrow, nostalgia, and wishes.

I had written many stories of childhood and adolescence before, including *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat*, *The Wind-bells Faraway*, and *Aiwan's Daffodils*. I had written many such stories for others. Now I felt I should write something for myself, leaving a sort of memento behind. The Wutong Courtyard I had written about in the book was the place I had lived longest during my childhood. The family of the protagonist, Xiao Ai, was essentially my family. The beautiful island full of reed flowers was where I had spent my youth. The Qingyang town of the 1980s was actually the hometown I was most familiar with and the one I missed the most. I may write more of this sort of work in the future. I am not worried about whether children today understand the past. For good literary works, history, time, and background are never a problem, because humanity remains the same across the ages, and the changes in the human soul are not as rapid or decisive as the changes in the urban landscape. The soul always has to yearn for the past, to look back, to sigh, and to waver and feel regret. It has to know its own history, and to know the history of its parents, grandparents, and ancestors. It has to know where they came from, what



they experienced and encountered, all their joys and sorrows, and their thrills and disappointments. Reading such a novel is actually reading what it was like to be a child in the past, hearing the cry, pursuits, and dreams of that time. The images of yesterday may have yellowed, but they are not worn out, nor have they been destroyed. On the contrary, because of the layers of sentiment that have accumulated over the years, they have a nostalgic warmth, a smell of the deep earth, and the soft feel of an old cotton coat.

The children I've written about, Jin Ling, Xiao Xiao, Shan Mingming, Gou'er, Didi, Xiao Ya, Aiwan, Meixiang, Xiaomi... the moment they were born, they left my life. The way they left me was always the same. Once I let go, they flew like a bird from my keyboard, disappearing in the blink of an eye. I have never known where they had flown to, nor which little bookworms

would their beloved friends become.

Even so, I have loved to see them fly. I know they have flown all over the country and to many parts of Asia and even places in Europe, making friends with blond-haired, blue-eyed kids there. I pray they will be able to maintain their strength and fly into the future.

I know I am hard-working. I respect children as if they were God and never underestimate their wisdom or abilities. I try to keep up with the pace of children's progress, a Herculean task. In this way, as children develop, my works move forward too.

I must continue to work hard. The joy of writing lies in the midst of hard work.



## Interview with Huang Beijia

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**Reporter:** Hello, Ms. Huang. Since the publication of *Through the Eyes of a Child*, the story has won many honors, including the 2016 Good Books Award, the Inaugural Jingdong Literature Award, the Fourth Government Publishing Award, and the Chen Bochui International Children's Literature Award. The book has certainly been very fruitful. Aside from these honors, what special significance does *Through the Eyes of a Child* have?

**Huang Beijia:** Put simply, this book is a kind of test for me to see how far one can explore the depth of human nature in children's fiction. It examines how far a writer's pen can go in children's literature and how much young readers can accept. Children are human beings in a complete sense; moreover, they are social

beings. Their joys and sorrows cannot be separated from society. In writing a social background, the richness emerges and the characters are able to stand out from the backdrop of their times. Providing an accurate, sincere description of characters is a form of respect both for literature and for children.

**Reporter:** I purchased a copy of *Through the Eyes of a Child* as soon as it came out. It reminded me of *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat* in that it mobilizes your own childhood life on a large scale. The two books have the same air about them, the same flavor of childhood. After so many years, what is it that makes you look back on your childhood with such a deep emotion again?

**Huang Beijia:** People always move forward, and a writer's work must likewise move forward. The character setting for Gou'er in *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat* actually introduces loneliness and a sort of coldness outside the experience of the ordinary character settings for children. The character has an extremely rich inner world because of the environment into which she was born and the family in which she grew up. Exploring her inner world should be

a very interesting process. Unfortunately, when I wrote it a dozen or so years ago, I only scratched the surface. Now that I am older, I cherish the short time I have left to write, and I cherish my precious childhood memories more. I have to write deeply, and to write both light and shadow, writing the hearty rallying cry and the hidden and complicated painful process of growing up.

**Reporter:** *Through the Eyes of a Child* has been widely praised for its display of the superb writing skills of a mature author, its mastery of storytelling, its ability to grasp emotion and depict characters in a composed, amazing, almost flawless way. However, as far as my personal reading is concerned, compared with *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat*, with the move from first-person to third-person narrative in *Through the Eyes of a Child*, the narration becomes more controlled and composed, and the formation of the characters is achieved in an even more compact space, making it more tempestuous and vividly portrayed. However, I am also personally fond of *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat* because there's more self-expression in the character of Gou'er, more authenticity and more spontaneous writing. Through the narrator of *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat*,

the reader gets a clearer look at the people and things in the book: there is a sense of nostalgia. It is placid and natural, creating a greater sense of community resulting in a livelier, more vivid protagonist. The character of Duo'er in *Through the Eyes of a Child* is more perfect. In terms of character development, her role as an observer is of greater significance. Her degree of participation in the story is slightly less than what happens with the narrator of *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat*. As a result, she is a little blurrier. From the narrator of *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat* to Duo'er, what considerations went into the decision to move from first- to third-person narrative?

**Huang Beijia:** Thank you for your affection for *Gou'er Drifting from a Boat*. I like that book very much too. It was written in first-person narrative, creating a stronger natural sense of participation. The narrative "I" is completely integrated into the overall work like bone and flesh. That's the benefit of writing in first-person narrative. It unwittingly lures the enemy in, drawing the reader into the abyss. The structure of *Through the Eyes of a Child* is different. It's more like candied hawthorn on a stick. Duo'er is the stick on which the hawthorn

is skewered. She gets in the middle of the characters, but she herself is not one of the skewered fruit. She wanders outside the story. Moreover, she maintains her independence. If she failed to do so, this stick of candied hawthorn would become a soft mass—its form ambiguous, and the kernel unable to harden. In fact, when I first started writing it, I used first-person narrative, feeling it warmer and more familiar, making it easier for readers to enter the atmosphere of that era. But after writing two pages of it, I gave up. I didn't want that kind of warmth and familiarity. I wanted the book to leave readers with a sense of distance or strangeness. The point was not for readers to walk the streets of that era themselves, but to be separated by long years, looking back at it, thinking about it or feeling it.

**Reporter:** Looking at the children's literature you've created, from the first short story, *Small Boats*, to the later series of long stories, all of your work displays the temperament of an innate writer, someone who is creating a great number of fresh, vivid protagonists who are representative of children's literature. In my impressions from reading *Small Boats*, I find it surprising that during such a heavy burden

of the time, you were still able to write such deep truths, creating vivid, cheerful, lively, and daring characters as little Ms. Liu, and such a contrasting character as her sister, the teacher Ms. Liu. In *Small Boats*, you already showed an extraordinary ability to portray characters. Later, in your longer works, each character is so vivid—every child, whether it be the heroic advocate of justice Xiaoxiao; the simple, straightforward, sentimental and righteous Shan Mingming; the crafty, daring Gou'er; Didi with his mild symptoms of autism; or the clever, mature, weak boy suffering from leukemia, Du Xiaoya. Also the children characters in *Through the Eyes of a Child*, such as Wei Nan, Wei Bei, Wen Qinglai, and Ma Xiaowu are portrayed in detail. And so are the adults that surround them: the taxi driver Shan Liguó; the radio host Shu Yimei; Xiao Guihua, who was keen on getting petty advantages; a

calculative aunt; the freedom-loving Li Dayong; or any number of kind, intelligent, and lovely grandmothers... All of your characters are presented so vividly and solidly. They all “do everything they can to create movement in their lives, coming up with one chapter after another of humble and moving stories.” In creating characters, how do you manage to make each one so unique? Can you share your secret in simple terms, with writers of children literature, and especially for your young



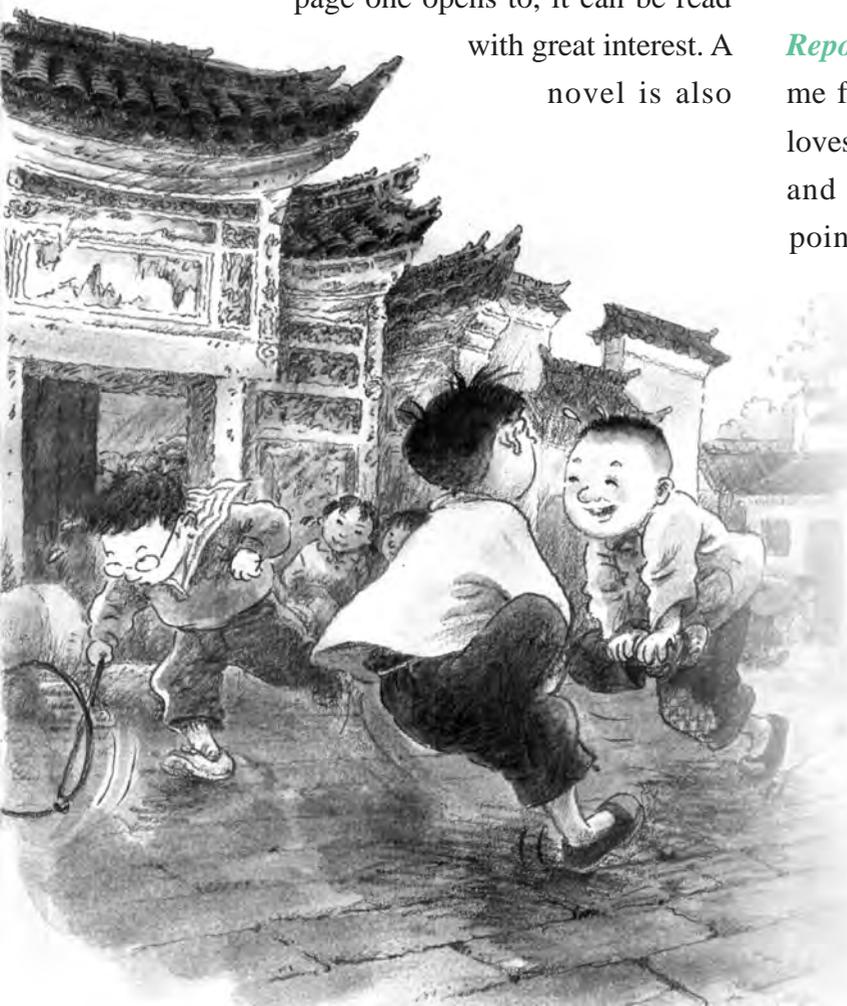
readers?

**Huang Beijia:** Writing is like shooting a movie, in that it is formed around one main character. This is a genre film, a type of film that belongs to the category of popular movies. At the same time, all supporting characters are portrayed in their own glory, with a unique personality or essence. This is art. When I write a novel, I pay special attention to the writing of secondary characters. Even if they only appear one or two times, showing their faces and saying a few words, I won't let them off easily. If the whole cast of characters is vivid, the whole novel can be vivid. No matter which page one opens to, it can be read

with great interest. A novel is also

about the art of language. The creation of characters depends on language. Language is a strange thing. It can't be mastered overnight. In addition to the natural gift of language sense, it also relies on years of experience, like a craft which requires one to put in hard work. How do you say something? How can you match words perfectly together so that they are fresh and alive? The color, the flavor, the rhythm and rhyme when reading... all these things have to be considered. Today, many young authors write several books a year. How can they pay attention to such details? Of course they have nothing but stock characters who are all the same.

**Reporter:** Reading your works often makes me feel that the author behind these texts loves children deeply, relishes their growth and speaks eloquently on their behalf, pointing out issues in a straightforward manner. I often think that this heroic spirit lays a deep foundation in your children's literature. You once said in an interview with the *China Reading Weekly* that "It should set off a corner of the world for children, letting them perceive the richness, complexity, and unlimited possibilities of the world." Based on



this ideal, what do you think presents the greatest difficulty in the artistic expression of children's literature?

**Huang Beijia:** The difficulty is not in selecting a theme, but in writing it well. It doesn't matter what you write. The important is how you write it. The last thing you should do is follow a trend, chase hot spots, or take advantage for yourself. Writing must be cumulative, salvaging things from the depths of life and time. Even if you are writing a contemporary work, you must think about it deeply and thoroughly before writing. The author's personal qualities and values are very important. I can't stand works which lack the light of humanity or present confused values whose bottom layer is a binary opposition between urban and rural areas. In those works, the children in the city are all sophisticated while those in the countryside are simple, or the hero's sons are all heroes, and the jerk's sons are all jerks. Simplicity and roughness may appear bright and dazzling at a sudden glance. They may fall in line with the expectations of the propaganda machine, but, under closer scrutiny, they go against nature and cannot withstand a single blow. The depth of the works reflects the depth of authors:

how many books they have read, what sort of thinking they have done, and how much wisdom they have gathered. And through their works, you can see right through them at a glance. The laymen can be deceived, but the professionals cannot.

**Reporter:** From what I have seen in reading your books, you are very good at realistic writing, while fantasy plays a much smaller role in your work. I can only think of *I'm Flying*, in which about half of the book is fantasy. Its protagonist, Du Xiaoya, becomes a little angel perched on the shoulder of Shan Mingming, and only Mingming can see him or talk to him. In the book, Xiaoya uses his mysterious powers to help Mingming, Yueliang, Zhou Xuehao, and the rest of their classmates. Have you written other fantasy books? How do you decide between realist fiction and fantasy?

**Huang Beijia:** I have been interested in science fiction since I was little. For many years, I've wanted to write a science fiction novel, but I was not able to do so. I've always been drawn to realistic themes, and I can't ignore those themes that draw me to them in this way. I felt that science fiction works are not bound by time, so they could

be written more slowly. I never imagined how quickly technology would develop, and I myself am aging very fast. Ten years ago, I could still read some mind-boggling books about mathematics and physical phenomena. Now, I'm only able to read the biographies of scientists. For that reason, I've never written a fantasy book, and I never will. This must be done by younger writers. *I'm Flying* talks about an angel, which is not really a fantasy character, though there is a little magic in it. Anyway, a person has to be self-aware, and I'm sure science fiction is not something I can write.

**Reporter:** Though the amount of fantasy contained in your works is relatively small, you've got a thick book entitled *Chinese Fairy Tales*. How does your rewriting of these folk stories influence your own fiction?

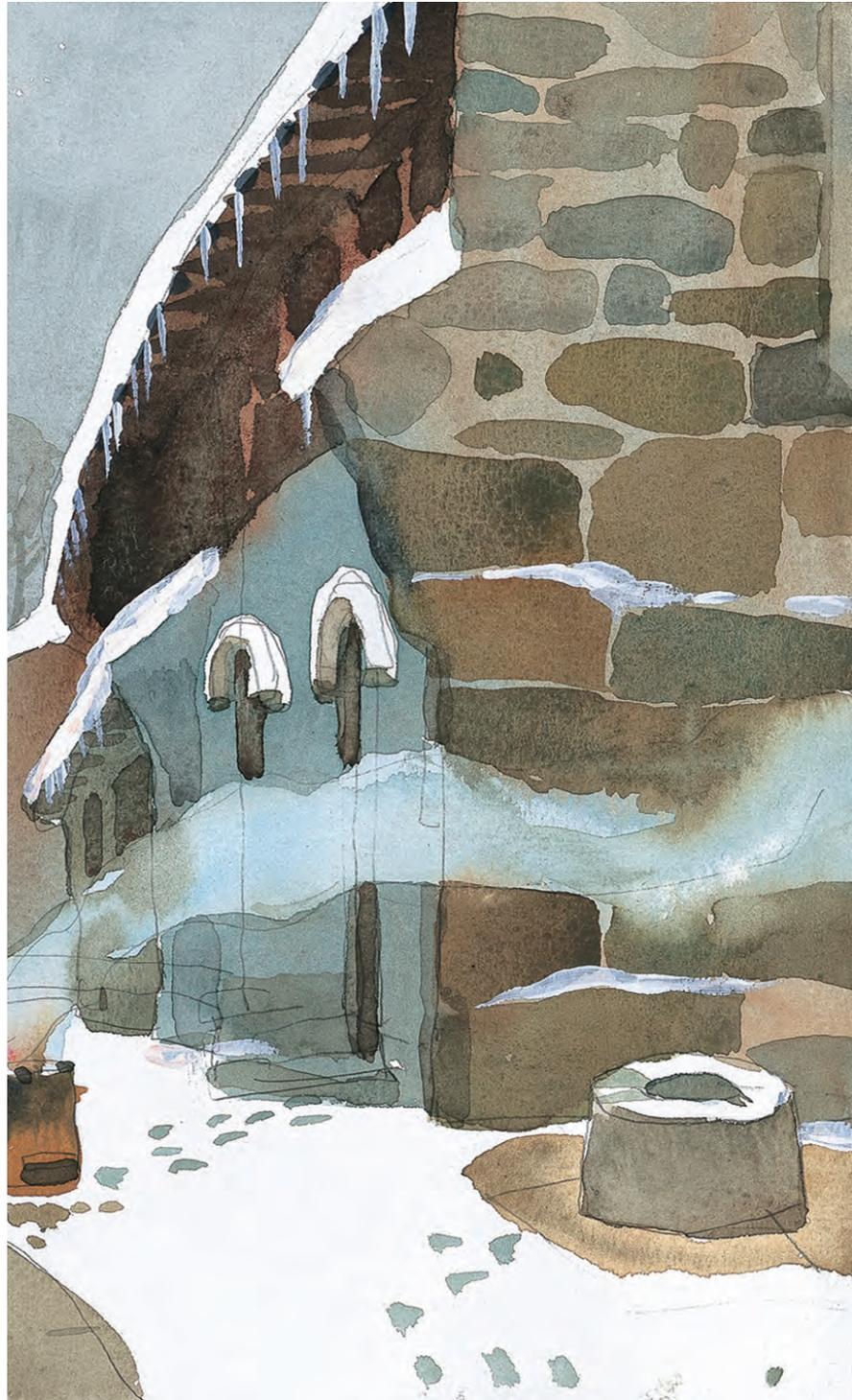
**Huang Beijia:** *Chinese Fairy Tales* can only be called one episode in my overall creative process. My editor has asked me to continue writing them, but I can't. If I continue, I will definitely fall into the habit of repeating myself, especially the plots and the language, and I really hate to repeat myself. To be honest, it was very tiring to

write this book. It was tiring to pick the stories. It was even more tiring to try to include language with a poetic rhythm. I wanted to make those fairy tales beautiful and gorgeous in the writing, but I'm not good at elegant language. It was something like dancing with shackles, and—to a certain degree—this project exceeded my abilities. Such a thing should only be attempted once, not tried over and over.

**Reporter:** As a writer of children's literature, you wrote in the postscript of *I Will Be a Good Child*, "I know I am hard-working. I respect children as if they were God, and never underestimate their wisdom or abilities. I try to keep up with the pace of children's progress, a Herculean task. In this way, as children develop, my works move forward too." I'd like to ask, how do you draw near to today's children?

**Huang Beijia:** It's not easy to get close to them. After all, it's not so convenient for me now. When my daughter was small, I lived among children. Now, could I just take a notebook and go to schools to conduct interviews? What I most object to is getting ideas from interviews, which too easily results in superficial and

instantaneous writing. For this reason, I avoid what is unfamiliar and only write about the things I know. Recently, I've written a lot about my own childhood, or about a life long before my childhood. These are stories that young people can't write, but children want to read them, and they need to read them. It should be left to young people to write contemporary themes. People should do what they are good at, and do their best at it. Of course, I don't rule out the possibility that my role in my grandchildren's growth might bring me new impulses and ideas, and that I might go back to writing contemporary stories then.





Selected Illustrations from Huang Beijia's Books

黃若蘭

## List of awards and other distinctions





### *I Will Be a Good Child*

- National Spiritual Civilization Construction “Five Ones Project” Award
- National Outstanding Children’s Literature Award
- Song Qingling Children’s Literature Award
- National Best Seller Award
- Excellent Book Award of Jiangsu Province
- Best Seller in the Publishing Industry
- Outstanding Children’s Book Award in six provinces of East China

### *I’m a Flag Raiser Today*

- National Spiritual Civilization Construction “Five Ones Project” Award
- One Hundred Excellent Books Recommended to Youth in China
- National Outstanding Children’s Literature Award
- Bingxin Children’s Book Award
- Excellent Book Award of Jiangsu Province
- Best Seller in the Publishing Industry
- Spiritual Civilization Construction “Five Ones Project” Award in Jiangsu Province



### *I’m Flying*

- National Outstanding Children’s Literature Award
- National Best Seller Award
- Excellent Publications Award for the Sixteenth National Congress of the CPC
- Best Seller in the Publishing Industry
- Excellent Book Award of Jiangsu Province



### *Chinese Fairy Tales*

- National Top Ten Children's Books
- Spiritual Civilization Construction "Five Ones Project" Award in Jiangsu Province
- Purple Mountain Literature Award of Jiangsu Province
- Excellent Book Award of Jiangsu Province
- Bingxin Overseas Literature Award
- Outstanding Book Award in Six Provinces of East China

### *Small Boats*

Excellent Children's Literature Award of Jiangsu Province



### *A Kiss for Mom*

- National Spiritual Civilization Construction "Five Ones Project" Award
- "Three Hundreds" Original Publishing Project
- National Top Ten Children's Books
- Excellent Book Award of Jiangsu Province
- Best Seller in the Publishing Industry





### *You're My Baby*

Nominee for Government Publishing Award in China  
 Chinese Excellent Publications Award  
 National Outstanding Children's Literature Award  
 One Hundred Excellent Books Recommended to Youth in China  
 China Population Culture Award  
 Spiritual Civilization Construction "Five Ones Project" Award in Jiangsu Province

### *Aiwan's Daffodils*

National Spiritual Civilization Construction "Five Ones Project" Award  
 "Three Hundreds" Original Publishing Project  
 One Hundred Excellent Books Recommended to Youth in China  
 Best Seller in the Publishing Industry  
 Taofeng Award for Excellent Books  
 "One Hundred Most Popular Books" by *China Reading Weekly*



### *Grass Bracelet* (a story set in 1944 )

Purple Mountain Literature Award of Jiangsu Province  
 Ninth Spiritual Civilization Construction "Five Ones Project" Award in Jiangsu Province



## *Yubao's World*

Nominee for Government Publishing Award

Spiritual Civilization Construction “Five Ones Project” Award  
in Jiangsu Province

“One Hundred” Most Popular Books Original Publishing Project

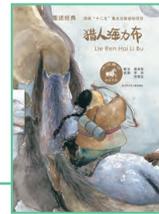
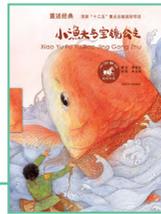
Best Seller in the Publishing Industry

Annual Book Award of Phoenix Media Group

Fifth Chinese Excellent Publications Award

## *Picture-Book Series of Chinese Fairy Tales*

One Hundred Excellent Books Recommended to Youth by the China  
State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio and Television



## *Heartfelt Wishes*

Shanghai Chen Bochui Children's Literature Gardener Award



### *Through the Eyes of a Child*

- Fourth Government Publishing Award
- China Book Review Society and CCTV “Good Books in China” in 2016
- Thirty Annual Books of 2016 by China Publishing Association
- Top Ten Children’s Books of 2016 by “Tencent Business Excellent Books in Chinese Language”
- Bingxin Children’s Book Award.
- Annual Book Award of *China Reading Weekly* in 2016
- Annual Book Award of Huadi Literature List 2017—Gold Prize for Children’s Literature
- Twelfth Wenjin Book Award by the National Library
- One Hundred Excellent Books Recommended to Youth in 2017
- Baidao Annual Books
- Jingdong Literature Award “Children’s Book Award of the Year”
- Designated Readings of the Fourth China Readers’ Festival
- Sixth Purple Mountain Literature Award
- Outstanding Children’s Book Award in Six Provinces of East China
- Chen Bochui International Children’s Literature Award
- Good Books Published in Jiangsu Province in 2016
- Seventh Taofeng Book Award of Nanjing Library

### *Flight of the Bumblebee*

“Good Books in China” for September by China’s Book Review Association



黃蓓佳

Complete bibliography  
of children's books



# A Complete bibliography

*Small Boats*, collection of short stories,  
Jiangsu People's Publishing, Ltd., China, 1981

*A Song for Mom*, collection of essays,  
Jiangsu People's Publishing Ltd., China, 1983

*When Reed Boats Float*, collection of short stories,  
Shanghai Children's Publishing House, China, 1983

*The Sea Faraway*, collection of essays,  
Shanghai Children's Publishing House, China, 1985

*I Will Be a Good Child*, a long novel,  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 1997

*Anthology of Huang Beijia* (four volumes),  
Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing Ltd., China, 1998

*I'm a Flag-Raiser Today*, a long novel,  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 1999

*I'm Flying*, a long novel,  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 1999

*Gou'er Drifting from a Boat*, a long novel,  
Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing Ltd., China, 2002

*Snowflakes Falling*, picture book,  
Phoenix Juvenile and children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2002



*Chinese Fairy Tales*, collection of fairy tales,  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2004

*Small Boats*, a long novel,  
Hong Bo Publishing Ltd., Hong Kong, China , 2006

*A Kiss for Mom*, a long novel,  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2006

*The Wind-bells Faraway*, collection of short stories,  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2007

*I Will Be a Good Child*, a long novel,  
Cotton Tree Publishing House, Hong Kong, China , 2007

*A Kiss for Mom*, a long novel,  
Cotton Tree Publishing House, Hong Kong, China , 2007

*You're My Baby*, a long novel,  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2008

*Together with Good Child*, collection of essays,  
Hunan Juvenile and Children's Publishing House, China, 2008

*I'm Flying*, a long novel,  
Cotton Tree Publishing House, Hong Kong, China , 2010

*Aiwan's Daffodils*, a long novel,  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2010

*Illustrated Chinese Contemporary Children's Literature Master Series (Huang  
Beijia)* (four volumes),  
China Juvenile and Children's Publishing House, China, 2010



*Grass Bracelet* (a story set in 1924), a long novel,  
Jiangsu People's Publishing, Ltd., China, 2010

*White Cotton Flower* (a story set in 1944), a long novel,  
Jiangsu People's Publishing, Ltd., China, 2010

*Sing-Sing-So* (a story set in 1967), a long novel,  
Jiangsu People's Publishing, Ltd., China, 2010

*Black Eyes* (a story set in 1982), a long novel,  
Jiangsu People's Publishing, Ltd., China, 2010

*Christmas Eve* (a story set in 2009), a long novel,  
Jiangsu People's Publishing, Ltd., China, 2010

*Huang Beijia Children Literature Classic Collections* (seventeen volumes),  
Daylight Publishing House, China, 2011

*Picture-Book Series of Chinese Fairy Tales* (ten volumes),  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2012

*Five Eight-Year-Olds-Series* (five volumes),  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2012

*Yubao's World*, a long novel,  
Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2012

*The Dancing Duck Yaoyao*, picture book,  
New Buds Publishing House, China, 2012

*Grass Bracelet* (a story set in 1924), a long novel,  
Cotton Tree Publishing House, Hong Kong, China, 2012

*White Cotton Flower* (a story set in 1944), a long novel,





## A Complete Bibliography

Cotton Tree Publishing House, Hong Kong, China, 2012

*Sing-Sing-So* (a story set in 1967), a long novel,

Cotton Tree Publishing House, Hong Kong, China, 2014

*Huang Beijia Moving Novel Series in Pinyin Edition* (ten volumes),

Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2014

*The Most Gentle Eyes*, collection of essays,

Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2016

*Through the Eyes of a Child*, a long novel,

Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2016

*Awards Series Written By Huang Beijia* (seven volumes),

Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2017

*Through the Eyes of a Child*, a long novel,

Chung Hwa Book Co., (H. K) Ltd., Hong Kong, China, 2018

*The Most Gentle Eyes*, picture book,

Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2018

*Caesar's Little Sister*, picture book,

Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2018

*The Little Man in the Mirror*, picture book,

Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2018

*The Moon on the Eaves*, picture book,

Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2018

*Flight of the Bumblebee*, a long novel,

Phoenix Juvenile and Children's Publishing Ltd., China, 2018



Selected Illustrations from Huang Beijia's Books

黃蓓佳

List of the titles  
going abroad



# List of the titles going abroad



## ***I Will Be a Good Child***

a long novel  
French  
Published by Editions Philippe  
Picquier, 2000



## ***I Will Be a Good Child***

a long novel (pocket edition)  
French  
Published by Editions Philippe  
Picquier, 2002



## ***A Kiss for Mom***

a long novel  
French  
Published by Editions Philippe  
Picquier, 2006



## ***I Will Be a Good Child***

a long novel  
German  
Published by Baobab Books,  
2007



## ***I Will Be a Good Child***

a long novel  
Korean  
Published by Grimm-Young  
Publishers Inc., 2007



## ***A Kiss for Mom***

a long novel  
Korean  
Published by Grimm-Young  
Publishers Inc., 2007



## ***I'm Flying***

a long novel  
Korean  
Published by Grimm-Young  
Publishers Inc., 2007



## ***Heartfelt Wishes***

chapter  
Japanese  
Used in the Japanese Textbook  
for Middle School Education,  
2008



**Sun and Moon  
(Pinyin Edition)**

digital book  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2011



**The Hunter Hai Libu  
(Pinyin Edition)**

digital book  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2011



**The Fairy in the Orange  
(Pinyin Edition)**

digital book  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2011



**Water Wharf  
(Pinyin Edition)**

digital book  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2011



**The Little Fisherman  
and the Princess of  
the Mirror (Pinyin  
Edition)**

digital book  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2011



**The Dancing Duck  
Yaoyao  
(Pinyin Edition)**

digital book  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2011



**A Dog Named Haihai  
(Pinyin Edition)**

digital book  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2011



**I Am Barton  
(Pinyin Edition)**

digital book  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2011



**Jade Grasshopper  
(Pinyin Edition)**

digital book  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2011



**The Angels Flying  
(Pinyin Edition)**

digital book  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2011

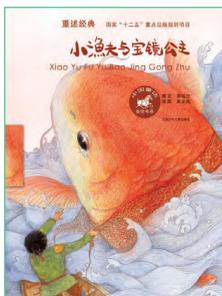


**Aiwan's Daffodils**  
*a long novel*  
 Korean  
 Published by Borim Press,  
 2012



**Picture-Book Series  
 of Chinese Fairy Tales  
 - Happy River Baby**

*digital book*  
 Simplified Chinese Character  
 Published by Overdrive, 2013



**Picture-Book Series of  
 Chinese Fairy Tales - The  
 Little Fisherman and the  
 Princess of the Mirror**

*digital book*  
 Simplified Chinese Character  
 Published by Overdrive, 2013



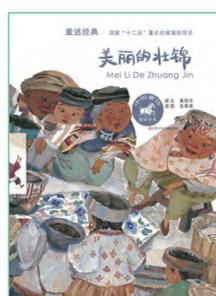
**Picture-Book Series of  
 Chinese Fairy Tales -  
 Children of Lugu Lake**

*digital book*  
 Simplified Chinese Character  
 Published by Overdrive, 2013



**Picture-Book Series of  
 Chinese Fairy Tales -  
 Flowers and Youth**

*digital book*  
 Simplified Chinese Character  
 Published by Overdrive, 2013



**Picture-Book Series of  
 Chinese Fairy Tales -  
 The Beautiful Brocade**

*digital book*  
 Simplified Chinese Character  
 Published by Overdrive, 2013



**Picture-Book Series of  
 Chinese Fairy Tales -  
 The Fairy in the Orange**

*digital book*  
 Simplified Chinese Character  
 Published by Overdrive, 2013



**Picture-Book Series of  
 Chinese Fairy Tales -  
 The Snake Groom**

*digital book*  
 Simplified Chinese Character  
 Published by Overdrive, 2013



**Picture-Book Series of  
 Chinese Fairy Tales -  
 The Cowherd and the  
 Weaver Girl**

*digital book*  
 Simplified Chinese Character  
 Published by Overdrive, 2013



**Picture-Book Series of  
 Chinese Fairy Tales -  
 Jade Grasshopper**

*digital book*  
 Simplified Chinese Character  
 Published by Overdrive, 2013



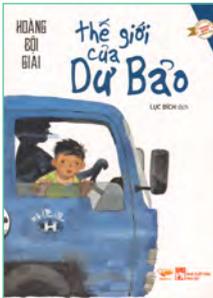
**Picture-Book Series of Chinese Fairy Tales - The Hunter Hai Libu**

*digital book*  
Simplified Chinese Character  
Published by Overdrive, 2013



**I Will Be a Good Child**

*a long novel*  
Vietnamese  
Published by Le Chi Culture and Communications Co.,Ltd., 2015



**Yubao's World**

*a long novel*  
Vietnamese  
Published by Le Chi Culture and Communications Co., Ltd., 2015



**I Will Be a Good Child**

*a long novel*  
Japanese  
Published by Jyuritsusha Co., Ltd, 2017



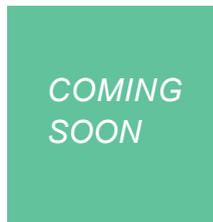
**Gou'er Drifting from a Boat**

*a long novel*  
Japanese  
Published by Jyuritsusha Co., Ltd., 2017



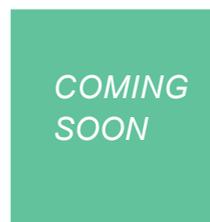
**A Kiss for Mom**

*a long novel*  
Vietnamese  
Published by Le Chi Culture and Communications Co., Ltd., 2018



**I'm Flying**

*a long novel*  
Vietnamese  
Published by Le Chi Culture and Communications Co., Ltd., 2018



**Gou'er Drifting from a Boat**

*a long novel*  
Vietnamese  
Published by Le Chi Culture and Communications Co., Ltd., 2018



**Flight of the Bumblebee**

*a long novel*  
Vietnamese  
Published by Le Chi Culture and Communications Co., Ltd., 2019



**Flight of the Bumblebee**

*a long novel*  
Hindi  
Published by GBD Books, 2019



**A Tu**

*a short novel*  
Japanese





Selected Illustrations from Huang Beijia's Books

蘇菲亞

## Sinopsis of ten books





*Flight of the Bumblebee*  
a long novel  
Copyright licensed to Vietnam and India

1

2 *Through the Eyes of a Child*  
a long novel  
Copyright licensed to Hong Kong, China



*A Kiss for Mom*  
a long novel  
Copyright licensed to France, Korea, Vietnam and Hong Kong, China

3

4 *You're My Baby*  
a long novel



*I Will Be a Good Child*  
a long novel  
Copyright licensed to France, Switzerland, Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Hong Kong, China

5

# Ten-Book List

6

## *Grass Bracelet* (a story set in 1924)

a long novel

Copyright licensed to Hong Kong, China



## *White Cotton Flower* (a story set in 1944)

a long novel

Copyright licensed to Hong Kong, China

7

8

## *Sing-Sing-So* (a story set in 1967)

a long novel

Copyright licensed to Hong Kong, China



## *Black Eyes* (a story set in 1982)

a long novel

9

10

## *Christmas Eve* (a story set in 2009)

a long novel





## *Flight of the Bumblebee*

When the Second Sino-Japanese War breaks out in 1937, a girl called Huang Chengzi moves westward with her father as his school is relocated. She settles on the campus where the “Five Universities of the Second Sino-Japanese War” are, on the Huaxi Dam. Afterward, her father takes Shen Tianlu, the orphan of his best friend, into his home. Six children spend their unusual childhood in a crowded, dilapidated little building.

Life under the fire of war is hard and bitter, but the experience of family support makes this period precious and radiant. Yet the time of being together is transient—Huang’s elder brother joins the army, her elder sister goes north to Yan’an, and Shen Tianlu is killed in an air strike against the Japanese army. Chengzi plays Shen Tianlu’s favorite music, *Flight of the Bumblebee*, and spends her life lost in memory.

The broad prospect of the times has linked the twists and turns of the fate of an intellectual family. The story is warm and affectionate, and the theme is broad and solemn.



## *Through the Eyes of a Child*

*Through the Eyes of a Child* is an entirely new, original children's novel. It is Huang Beijia's masterpiece, building on years of dedication.

The work narrates a story of a group of children growing up in the mid of Jiangsu province in the 1970s. Bai Mao (which literally means “white hair”), Duo'er, Ma Xiaowu, Wanwan, Wei Nan, Wei Bei, and other characters in the work have an ordinary childhood in the long-standing Renzi Lane. Their minds and souls, like their parents', experience the test of their vast social life. As they grow up, their unforgettable childhood in Renzi Lane is forever engraved in their souls through their eyes.”



## *A Kiss for Mom*

Andy is a ten-year-old boy who is called “Andy Zhao” by his teacher, “Andy Baby” by his father, and “Didi” (meaning “little brother”) by his mother. At his father’s funeral, Didi first meets his mother, Shu Yimei, who looks like a beauty who has just stepped out of a picture. At that gloomy moment, fate pushes Didi to a precipitous cliff, on the other side of which his mother Shu Yimei smells of sweet orange.

This is a novel focusing on the growth of children in single-parent families. The author embraces the present life headlong, presenting in the strangeness, subtlety, and anxiety in the acquaintance between Didi and his mother and the interaction between them in a tender and inspiring way. The story is engaging and thought-provoking, with an intricate plot and a refined style. The portrayals of cousin Ke’er, uncle Baolin, and Zhang Xiaochen (also called “Bloody Claws”) fill the novel with the liveliness of the times, rendering it an entertaining read.

## You're My Baby

Beibei is a child with Down syndrome, a mild incurable mental impairment. When Beibei was two years old, his father died on a field trip. Unable to bear the shock, his mother left. Beibei lived with his loving, tolerant grandmother, who trained him with patience and persistence to make him a self-reliant, dignified person. Grandma's efforts were not in vain. Beibei turned out to be a warm, kind, compassionate, nature-loving child.

When Beibei was ten years old, his grandmother died of heart disease and he became an orphan. Beibei's fate touched many people, especially Li Dayong, a hydropower maintenance worker in the community. Dayong was a young man born in the 1980s, who was generally not quite reliable, yet he was fond of Beibei because of his simplicity and sincerity and was always concerned about Beibei's growth. After Beibei had stayed in the welfare home for a while, his uncle and aunt took their child, Xiao Pang, to the city from the countryside to stay with Beibei. The two adults, the two kids, and a big dog named Meimei experienced many unforgettable stories. Influenced by Beibei's flawless soul, his uncle and aunt became more selfless, and Li Dayong grew up and matured while taking care of Beibei.





## *I Will Be a Good Child*

Jin Ling, a sixth-grader, is a girl with mid-level academic achievement, but is also smart, kind, and honest. In order to be a “good child”, she makes various efforts but also tries to resist against parents and teachers in an effort to keep her innocence and purity. In the end, she and her classmates walk confidently into the entrance examination room.

The novel artistically presents the school and family life of a primary school graduate and successfully portrays the images of Jin Ling, Yu Pang'er, Shang Hai, Yang Xiaoli, and other pupils as well as their mothers, fathers, and their teacher, Ms. Xing. The plot is vivid; the emotions are genuine; the language is fluent, and the images are full of the distinct characteristics of the times and a rich flavor of life.

## Grass Bracelet (a story set in 1924)

This is the opening volume in the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series*. We must travel back almost ninety years to reach the era when the book's main character, Little Meixiang, is growing up. Narrow lanes in the slanting sunlight, grey slate flagstones, white well-surrounds and metal knockers on red-lacquer doors—all these fill the eyes vividly. Yet the girl's footprints have already faded.

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## White Cotton Flower (a story set in 1944)

This second novel in the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series* is set in wartime. Amid the terrible suffering of the Second Sino-Japanese War, a “white cotton flower” falls from the sky and miraculously yet rudely invades the world of a village child, Kejian. From this time on, his experiences and memories are bound up with a painful chapter in Chinese history. The young Western pilot and the Eastern country boy stare at each other cautiously, then stretch out their hands and set out on a journey through life together.

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## Sing-Sing-So (a story set in 1967)

The *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series* has reached the 1960s, and this story cannot escape the confrontations and tensions of that extraordinary period. An eight-year-old child, Little Mi, with his four-year-old brother tagging behind, wanders through a forbidding and threatening world, frightened and fragile. But one day, when Little Mi yearns for light, then light appears: a charming and meandering Indonesian folk song, “Sing-Sing-So,” lights up his lonely and ordinary life.



## Black Eyes (a story set in 1982)

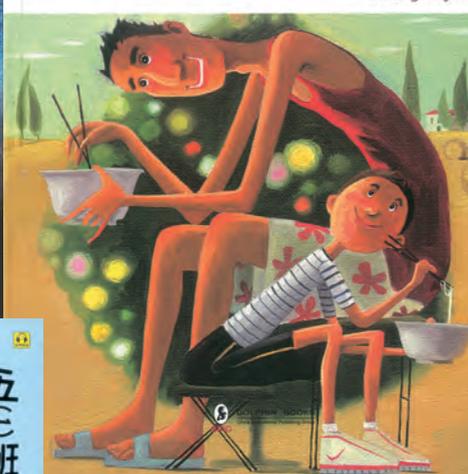
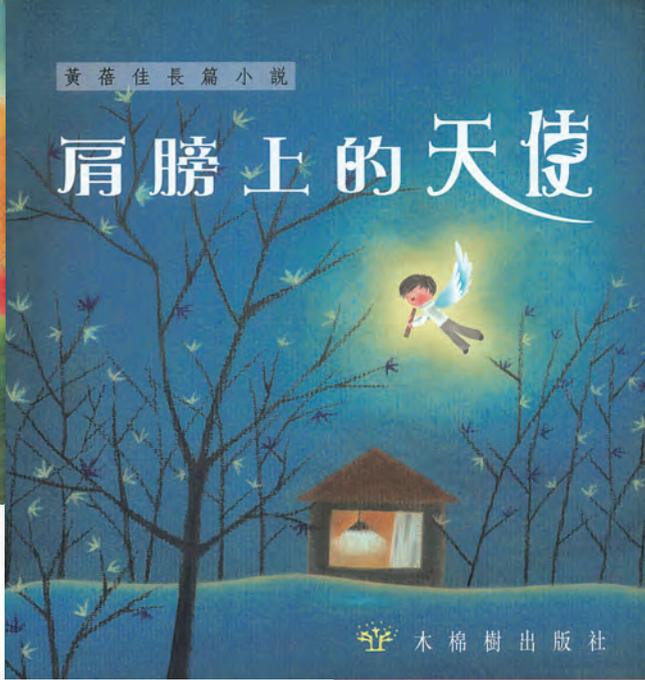
It is the beginning of the 1980s. Aiwan keeps one eye on herself, and her other eye is fixed on her elder brother and sister. In a family of several children, this heart-achingly lovely child must use all her strength if she is to make out a little room for herself among her siblings, breathing in great gulps and growing up in a flash.

## Christmas Eve (a story set in 2009)



Am I awake? Am I alive? Am I becoming taller? Will good luck knock at our door today? Every morning, when Ren Xiaoxiao wakes up, he asks himself these questions. A young father and his clever little son are living in awkward circumstances, a situation which makes people raise their eyebrows. Yet their life together is not without warmth, and is full of fun. Then one day their world is turned upside down when a young criminal enters their lives. But in the darkness, the faint light of humanity flashes: responsibility and love, salvation and compassion... in the eyes of the child, his father has just grown up.





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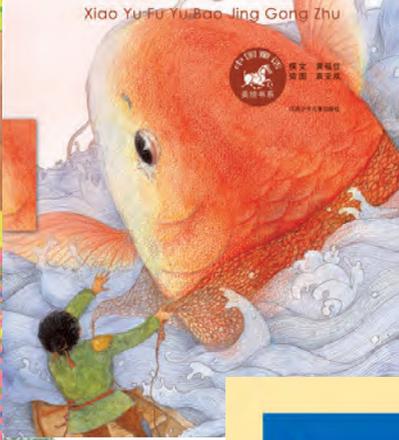
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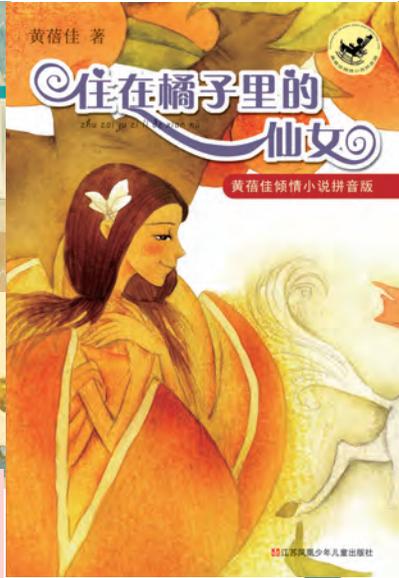
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# 黑眼睛

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# 野蜂飞舞



# 童眸

Tong Mou



# 艾晚的水仙球



# 芦花飘飞的时候

LONHA PIAOFEI DE SHIHOU



# 白棉花

1944



# 天使飞翔



# 我是巴顿



# 小船，小船



# 井里的天空



# 幸福来敲门



# 会跳舞的摇摇

导读 李霞  
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边读 李霞





Selected Illustrations from Huang Beijia's Books

黃薊

## Review articles



## Paying Tribute to the Young Soul

*by Wang Zheng, Inspector of the Jiangsu Writers Association, and Xiao Hua, Member of the Jiangsu Writers Association*

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Huang Beijia is one of the few versatile writers in China who continue to work in both children's and adult's literature. When we study her works, we often marvel at the fact that she can fight on two fronts at the same time, and with such a brilliant record. It's as if she simultaneously worked with two pens and two inks. Her children's and adult's literature seem almost to have been written by two different people, each with its own language style and communication system, yet she is able to go freely from one to the other. Huang's literature for adults is harder, and her exploration of human nature, penetration into the world, and deep consideration of history can be called sharp. But her children's literature is of a different sort in both tone and temperament, especially since the creation of the *Huang Beijia Love Stories Series*. There, we believe, she has constructed a sort of brand, the Huang Beijia children literature's aesthetic standard.

According to her postscript in *Flight of the Bumblebee*, the creation of this piece grew out of the historical documentary *Wind Through Huaxi Dam*, which drew her interest toward the history of the joint operation of schools undertaken by Yanjing University, Jinling University, Jinling Women's College of Arts and Sciences, Qilu University, and Huaxi Xiehe University, which had moved inward to the Huaxi Dam in Chengdu during the Second Sino-Japanese War. This was actually another southwestern united college during the history of the war, that was a school in exile and a united school that went through a very difficult time. It brought together the elites of higher education at that time, who experienced the threat of war together. The school played a key role in cultivating outstanding individuals, while also maintaining the cultural heritage of the nation. This is not the first time Huang Beijia has directed children's attention to

history. She also successfully managed to do so in the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series*. This was the first look we got into Huang's view of children and her concept of children's education. The core values of her aesthetics in children's literature are both entertainment and education. There is nothing novel about this. In fact, it can even be called traditional. Even so, under the influence of today's entertainment industry, this view of the creation of children's books is something to be cherished. It requires considerable courage to hold on to it.

For this reason, Huang's children's fiction can be said to be upright and serious, in terms of subject matter. Comparatively speaking, she is concerned with the growth of children, thinking about their needs through the development process and what or how much help she can offer to them. Over the years, there has not been much historical fiction available for children, particularly not realist fiction, as many

publishers and writers worried that children would not be interested in such works. But Huang Beijia believes that children's growth needs history. Human growth is a natural process of continuous socialization. Socialization is what makes humans different from other creatures. Humans not only inherit the biological genes of those who have gone before unconsciously. Other creatures in nature live only in the present, but humans also live in the history of their species. In Huang's view, the question is not whether children's fiction should engage with history, but rather how historical issues should be depicted. In the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series*, the lives and growth processes of five children from different historical periods are presented. *Flight of the Bumblebee* focuses on the exiled university during the Second Sino-Japanese war. Obviously, Huang narrates this as a special historical event, with moving stories and profound implications, and she thinks it is important for today's



children to know about it.

*Flight of the Bumblebee* is about the Second Sino-Japanese War, but it is also about a university, about education, about holding fast to civilization. During the Japanese invasion, teachers took their instruments and books in an effort to preserve the spark of a culture that was wavering in the midst of extinction. With their women and children by their sides, they plodded through land and water, and continued to educate and save the nation in the desolate mountains. Coming from different universities, teachers and students all lived in an unimaginably austere environment, continuing the writing tradition and passing knowledge from one generation to the next as they built a legendary “education realm.”

The novel has created the characters of Huang Yuhua, Fan Weihai, and Xu Fangxun, along with Professor Tao of the Linguistics Department, Professor Mei of the Agriculture Department, and other professors. They taught and educated people at universities that were not universities, wrote books, set up theories, and conducted scientific research and experiments. Some even gave their lives for this effort. This was not just a spirit of contribution to the land or the nation, but to all mankind. Huang portrays the children in the book in this period: they even participate in the professors’ experiments, sharing this extraordinary and great spirit. This sort of spirit is what children today must learn and inherit, because it is this sort of spirit that allows people to experience



countless catastrophes, then to rise up from them, and forge the pillars of civilization.

In *Flight of the Bumblebee*, Huang Beijia still holds a faint smile; she wants children to be happy. Even though the book is war themed, she created a relatively relaxed environment for the children. The Liu Garden is a small courtyard for the professors, but is also a place where the children live, play, and grow. Although it is modest and poor and constantly faces bombing by the Japanese, it is still a pure land. The main thread of the novel revolves around the lives of Huang Yuhua's five children; Shen Tianlu, an orphaned child left behind by Yuhua's classmate; and the other teachers' children. Huang Beijia saves and brings to life the growth of children during the war through her fiction. She uses the children's innocence as a natural barrier to separate their world from that of adults, to pull apart the crimes happening around them from a children's ingenuity, and to divide the difficulties and hardships from the children's natural joy. As a result, unfamiliar villages become interesting, and the atmosphere of war urges the children to take risks, while the many difficulties add twists and waves to ordinary events. Huang

controls the perspective and narrative range in a child's field of vision. She uses the relationships between the many children as a link, conflict, driving force of the story, creating a colorful life for the children in it. There is always children's joyous laughter in the sky over Huaxi Dam.

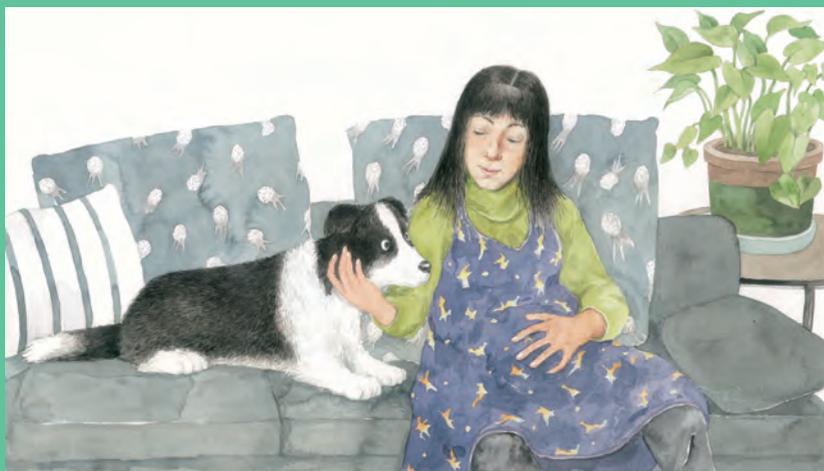
Huang Beijia's children's novels have a special poetic flavor. One could say this poetry grows out of the children's innocence. It could also be said that it grows out of Huang's literary style. These are, of course, concrete interpretations of Huang's aesthetics of children's literature. But in *Flight of the Bumblebee*, the poetry arises from sadness, or even pain. This sadness shows how the lives and fates of the people at Huaxi Dam get lost in history. In writing this work, Huang went to the former site of the united university, today's Huaxi Medical College. She wrote, "Along the wide, creaking wooden stairs, the ear seems to pick up in endless succession the footsteps, the laughter of youth, and the conversations mixed with English in the past between teachers and students." These images from Huang's imagination at the time of her visit entered the book as characters and scenes. History is distance,

and history naturally possesses artistic value. Although the works are presented through text, a sort of tempest—the vicissitudes of human lives—constantly overflows from the words, tenaciously moving the reader to feel great compassion.

Of course, what is most touching about this poetry is the lives of the young. The children in the book witness the insistent greatness of their fathers; they experience the war, witness death, and grow into a precocious patriotism. So for the sake of the land, the nation, and the bright futures in their hearts, the young lives step to the front line. Shen Tianlu becomes a member of the Flying Tigers, fighting enemy planes right up to the end. Even when his fuel is completely gone, he does not escape with his parachute, but dies together with

his enemy, his blood staining the sky. The older brother joins the army, goes to Myanmar, and sacrifices his life in a foreign land. From young, the older sister's feelings are written on her face. She is very passionate and, having enthusiastically accepted revolutionary ideals, she travels to Yan'an and dedicates her young life to the battlefield. Lives make up the largest, most natural poem in the book, and the demise of a young life is like the most brilliant last song. The protagonist and narrator of the book, Huang Chengzi, recalls in her old age, "They have died a worthy death, like fireworks bursting into bloom overhead, brilliant and gorgeous." But the writer writes, "I am saddened by the young lives, the young souls, in my writing. They fly like meteors across the sky, one after another, their lives so

dazzling and brief. They leave behind their pure smiling faces and, even after a long time has passed, they remain just as charming and bright." Of course, it is not necessary to mention the connection between the story and music. The classical melody of *Flight of the Bumblebee* runs through



the book and is closely tied to the abundance of poetic flavor. Was this Huang Beijia's accidental inspiration? Or had this artistic and literary something this creator long sought to perfectly combine music and literature?

We believe that this sort of reading experience will make every reader of Huang Beijia, whether young or old, feel to be reuniting with an old friend when they read *Flight of the Bumblebee*. The difference lies in the characters and stories, but the soul and tones are the same. Of course, each time a new work is written, Huang will encounter new problems and will test new solutions. This is the inevitable path for the formation of Huang's brand of children's literature, or the accumulation and crystallization of the individual writer's style. For instance, faced with this theme, what Huang first has to deal with is how children's literature should describe the problem of war. In adult literature, there are many ways to learn and many people to learn from, but in children's literature, the solution must be enriching, for children are a special group



of readers, and it is wrong to give them cruel plots or images. This is not simply an artistic issue, but is also related to the ethics of writing children's literature. At the same time, we cannot avoid the truths of history and the attributes of war, because making children aware of these things is part of the educational work of society. Our education for children regarding wars has not increased, quite the contrary. More importantly, proper education concerning war has always been lacking.

Huang Beijia's approach is controlled. It can be said that, as a children's novel, one of the successes of *Flight of the Bumblebee* is that it has found a proper narrative method for treating war. The core technique of this method is to control the quantity and

to decide what information to avoid. The obvious example is that the sacrifices of the three young lives are achieved through light and simple reporting and retelling. Shen Tianlu's story is more detailed, but even so it is only one hundred words. What we see behind these numbers is sincere care and artistic arrangement.

One can also speak of the narrative method of this novel. In our opinion, it is also this piece's aesthetic contribution to Huang's children's literature. In fact, at least since *Chinese Fairy Tales*, Huang has long paid attention to how to activate the artistic resources available in traditional children's literature or even folk literature. To summarize the narrative structure of *Flight of the Bumblebee* in a single phrase, it is like "listening to Grandma tell a story from the past." In traditional children's stories or folk tales, we often begin with, "Once upon a time." The reason we have such a formula for opening our stories is that it has a sort of archetypal meaning, for in the narratives of children's literature, the status of child and narrator is not equal. Most children can only act as listeners. In seeking to renew this model, Huang Beijia draws on the narrative methods of modern fiction. She makes the character play the role of

narrator too, combining narration and depiction, while at the same time paying attention to the continuity of the story and taking note of the reading level and receptive psychology of the child. This is done with much care and thought, and it is through such hard work that Huang enjoys a great success in her unique children's literature.

Opening up *Flight of the Bumblebee* is the prologue "After just a short time together, we are separated for ages." Let me sit down and listen to the eighty-eight-year-old Chengzi tell past stories about her and her little friends.



## *Flight of the Bumblebee:* An Ode to Ardent Young Lives

*Xu Lu, Member of the China Writers Association*

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“The first month has passed, and the fragrance of early spring fills the air. The bright yellow jasmine flowers are the first things to bloom in the wilderness, in clusters, in strips, lining the land that had withered all winter. Humanity’s mood follows suit, revived and brilliant. When jasmine flowers bloom, the wild bees come, and the white butterflies come. Even the birds rejoice, creating a world of vivacity and excitement.” This is a scene in which a young girl, Huang Chengzi, walks home from school in a world immersed in war. As she watches the scene of wild bees dancing in the wake of spring, she thinks of the piano piece she is fond of, *Flight of the Bumblebee*.

The country is broken, but the landscape

remains. Even in the nightmare of war, the exuberant and beautiful flower of hope blooms. Although the story entitled *Flight of the Bumblebee* is set in the chaos of war and exile, the writer does not lay out or depict the horror, disaster, and despair. Instead, in this dark time she uses Huang Chengzi’s cherishing of life and faith in it. The desire to protect the nation, the hopes and expectations for the future of this young girl, her family, her classmates, and her friends are the main thread of the novel. The plot is woven around the growing experience of these teenagers in a war-torn generation and how they face such hard times, taking a firm, optimistic approach to the future, armed with new hopes.

Although it talks about that dark time,

the story is full of warmth and light. The famed springtime melody, *Flight of the Bumblebee*, is always present in the novel. It is as if it was being played for those flaming young lives to save the people driven away and ravaged by the war in a dark nightmare.

Any ideal story is a beacon of hope. This novel sends its light and hope into the world. Each child in the story, each life as beautiful as a pomegranate flower or a flame, is like an angel or a miracle that God has given us. Surprisingly, the harder, more tortuous, and darker the time, the more extraordinary, optimistic, and unbendable will be the strength in these young lives. Such power is exactly the great national spirit of the Chinese people, which has suffered numerous setbacks over thousands



of years, yet it still remains unyielding, always improving, and constantly regenerating.

Huang Beijia is a writer who is full of familial affection and national identity, a humanist and realist writer who is compassionate and kind, whose works flow with a broad, gentle, maternal spirit. She rarely writes utopian fantasy stories. Her decades of creating children's literature have almost entirely been a response to Hans Christian Andersen's famous saying, "The most wonderful fairy tale written by God is the real life of each individual."

The setting of *Flight of the Bumblebee* is vast and open. It is the worldwide anti-fascist war, and China's fight against Japan. With the overt goal of respecting and treating kindly the history of her motherland, the writer also takes into account the characteristics of children's literature. She selects a special household as a growing environment for a group of young protagonists. Then, through small objects and details, layer by layer, the complete stories and intricate fates of the characters burst forth. Through the description of the most subtle nuances, she reflects the characteristics of that great

time, including the style and features of the whole era and its society.

Once the war broke out, Chinese universities, primary schools, and middle schools all moved inland to flee the war. So, the lifeblood of the Chinese nation could be preserved. The seeds of culture and education for the country and the people could be passed down, and Chinese culture and civilization carried on. At a critical juncture, the emergence of these wartime universities, middle schools, and primary schools brought new hope to China. At the time, many Chinese families voluntarily scattered. They preferred the pain of being separated from their loved ones in exchange for the opportunity for their school-age children, who would be able to learn from their teachers and continue to pursue their education through chaos and exile. In the years that the war was raging, the state, the family, and the school jointly guarded this pure piece of the land. With determination, they diligently guarded and nurtured a generation into becoming sensible youngsters, allowing them to grow up healthy and upright despite the negative environment. This was the consensus of the most insightful Chinese people at that time. “Youth is the strength of the nation,”



it is often said. As long as the children and young people remained, China would not die.

The protagonists in the story are a group of children who endure a life of hardship. The father of the story, a university professor, is deeply conscious of the righteousness of the cause and loves the children dearly. Just as he says as he waves his pipe, “China has not died yet. It is still resisting. China’s hope is in you. There is no paradise. We must build a paradise. Even as you study, take classes, enjoy your childhood, and pick up knowledge and skills, you must

remember that once this War of Resistance is won, it is up to you to rebuild China.”

The war takes the peace, happiness, and dreams that these beautiful children should have had and destroys them. The war also tempers and educates the children as they grow.

For instance, when Kejun joins the Boy Scouts, he helps in the wartime hospital and witnesses groups of wounded soldiers who have been evacuated from the front line. He sees a tragic, hellish scene there. Each day when he goes home, he cannot eat, and he even locks himself in his room and weeps one time. At this time, “he swore that when he grew up, he would join the army as soon as he turned eighteen. He would not set foot inside his own home again until he had completely wiped out the Japanese.” And in this way, a future hero grows up rapidly in the face of the reality of blood and fire.

Chengzi’s sister, Shuya, who joins a battlefield service group, travels all the way to the impoverished southern Shaanxi border. After she returns, she tells the whole family all she has seen and experienced. Through this journey, she comes to understand how hard the life

of Chinese farmers is and how difficult a thing the Second Sino-Japanese War is. She sees with her own eyes the elderly and young local people surviving only in one pair of cotton trousers each in the winter, and with only wild vegetables boiled with water in their pots. The wounded and sick die of pain in the hospital because of lack of medical care. The cruel war awakens all the passion and strength in the heart of this young woman, and she finally opts to bid farewell to the school, join the Communist Party, and go to the northwest front to join the war against Japan there.

Even the younger sister, Huang Chengzi, who is always a carefree, wildly playful child, is deeply impacted by the pain of subjugation amidst the days of wandering and the sounds of alarm year after year. She finally understands the meaning of “When the state’s no more, the land remains.” She says, “After two years of hiding, when we heard the alarm, we all grew up. We knew we could survive, eat, and study only because there were countless soldiers paying the price for us, forming a great wall around us with their own flesh and blood.”

As Chengzi grows up and matures during

the war, she enjoys a friendship with Shen Tianlu, a brother who shares no blood relationship with her. Tianlu is the orphan of her father's good friend, and he was adopted by her family. He is young, but he has experienced the hardships of life. He is kind and intelligent, and he has learned the wisdom of survival in the midst of a life of suffering. The time of war, just like the hot season, seems to require only half the usual time to mature this boy into adulthood. In the novel, to keep his mother warm during the winter, the thin Tianlu secretly goes out to work as an unskilled laborer for about twenty days, earning a little money to finally redeem for her the leather vest which has been pawned to the Ma household. This episode brings tears to one's eyes. Tianlu likewise loves Chengzi, who is growing up day by day, and cares for her just like a real brother. The innocent, simple love and friendship quietly blossoms between these two young people. He looks forward to her playing *Flight of the Bumblebee* well, encouraging her with the words, "One day, the little bee will fly across the keys. One day..." Chengzi keeps these words in her heart.

The story ends when, during a national disaster, Kejun resolutely joins the ranks of

the Chinese Expeditionary Force, losing his life on the battlefield in Myanmar. Shuya goes to the northwest to join the anti-Japanese fight, but fails to live to see the day of victory. Tianlu becomes a member of the famous Flying Tigers he has admired for so long and dies with the enemy while engaging in a fierce aerial battle. Chengzi always remembers what he said, "Chengzi, wait for me to come home. You can play the piano for me. Just play that one, *Flight of the Bumblebee*..."

A generation of children grew up during the war. In the end, they shed their blood on the battlefield to save the dying nation, letting the flower of youth bloom in the wilderness of blood and fire. Only the story's narrator, the girl Huang Chengzi, is left, playing Tianlu's favorite song when he was alive, *Flight of the Bumblebee*, living with her nostalgia for the boy who was as fresh and pure as a pomegranate tree, right up to today's peaceful times.

*Flight of the Bumblebee* is a beautiful and poetic novel of youth. "After just a short time together, we are separated for ages. The entire sky is the freedom you fly over." These two lines that appear as an epigraph at the beginning of the story



set the poetic tone for the whole novel. The story is filled with precise, wonderful, poetic descriptions. For instance, we read, “After many years, I still remember the starry sky that night. There were so many stars that they were like an irresistible force, sufficient to move the mountains and overturn the seas. It was as if they would drop from the sky with one order, so dense, so solemn, and so eager. On the path from the garden, there was a thin greyish white layer of snow, and under the starry sky, it was sometimes suffused with small, broken bits of light like corn. The air was cold and fresh.” This description makes today’s readers feel afresh that even though the cruelty of war was a part of the lives of these young protagonists, they did not live in shadow and despair, but rather in hope and light, walking in the brilliance of love and beauty.

Real Life from a Child's Perspective  
— Huang Beijia's Novel *Through the Eyes of a Child*

*Liu Xuyuan, Member of the China Writers Association*

*Through the Eyes of a Child* is one of Huang Beijia's meticulously told stories in which she gathers all the childhood experiences long hidden in her heart and explores them fully and without reservation. In writing, she is not excessively concise, but she wants to condense all the good material into no more than one hundred thousand words to write an elaborate work worthy of her childhood memories. Since her debut long ago, she has more than forty years of experience in creative work, and she has been writing for children for more than a decade. Looking at her prior experience now, it all seems to be a preparation for this book. This is not at all surprising, because before her, we have works such as Xiao Hong's *Hulan River Chronicles*, Lin Haiyin's *My Memories of Old Beijing*, and Cao Wenxuan's *Grass House*. They are all likewise elaborate works in which the writers' long hidden

childhood experience is aroused. They all produced many great literary achievements that became the best work of those writers. For Huang Beijia, this is a positive call. Now, I think it is possible to say without reservation that *Through the Eyes of a Child* is not inferior to those famous works, and in some areas, it is even superior.

The book's postscript is a long, beautiful work of prose. The author employs a mixed tone of age and pleasure, recalling her childhood as if enumerating her family treasures. She borrows a thought from V. S. Naipaul, writing that her jubilant elders and peers were wandering in a desperate world, and it was their pleasures and displeasures that became interesting domestic trivia which colored her childhood memories. She adds that, upon entering adulthood, she had been to many countries and met many people,

and she had tasted successes and failures, favors and humiliation, cold and heat, but there really was not anything which was engraved in her heart, nothing which caused tightening pain when she thought about it late at night. In other words, the material that can truly be condensed into gems within time and heart are memories of childhood. Why is this the case? Life is always flowing, but what changes is the eyes through which we view life, our perspective of the world. This is why the postscript is entitled “A Clean, Bright Pair of Eyes.” In fact, the eyes of childhood are not only clean and bright. They are often perplexed and confused. They are full of many thoughts and overflowing with desire and disappointment. They are close to a key point in life, the period of separation, the moment to become an adult. We will put this point aside for the moment. But suffice it to say that the life seen through those eyes becomes the only memory that can later make us wake with pain of it in the middle of the night. A mature writer is finally determined to weave those memories with solemnity and care, writing them out like the thread produced by a silkworm. Once such a work is written, it will naturally occupy a special place in a

creative career, if not the highest.

As I read *Through the Eyes of a Child*, I kept being pinned down by the author’s words.

In reading the first chapter, entitled “Grey Rabbit,” I was affected by the mental ups and downs of the withdrawn and hopeless Bai Mao. However, I was also excited by the kindness shown by Ma Xiaowu, who usually liked to do as he pleased. But still, I felt like I was enjoying the book the book from the sidelines. When I read the second chapter, “Elder Sister and Younger Sister,” I was suddenly sunk into it. I held my breath in deep concentration and followed the story with great anticipation, wanting to know the outcome of the unfortunate sisters’ predicament. As I read the third story, “Sesame Candy,” I was moved by the entrepreneurial experience of Ximei and Xiaowu and was inspired by their resistance. In “Tall Gatehouse,” the child from the countryside was simple, capable, silly, and unlucky. I found myself sympathizing, laughing, and even growing angry with him. His departure cast a bright light in the story, even though it was a tragic ending, and it allowed the reader

a release from holding the breath a little too long. I read the entire book in a single sitting, without distraction. Because I had been a critic for so many years, my old internal habit constantly prodded me, asking, “Is this children’s literature? Is writing of such a complex and heavy life suitable reading for children? What will children make of it?” I knew these questions were urging me to think, but I was powerless to pull myself away from the story. My feelings were completely entangled with the disposition and fate of the characters. Right at the end, I came to a sentence that read, “In Duo’er’s little mind, there are many memories of the past, just as there are many fears of the future.” My mind was suddenly illuminated, as if struck by lightning. All at once, I understood the meaning of the work.

Yes, I was familiar with that sentence pattern. It appeared at the end of a short story by Zweig entitled *The Governess*. The story is about two eleven- or twelve-year-old girls from a wealthy family in Austria who, upon getting an alarming insider’s view of the adult world, find their minds completely bombarded. We read, “They are no longer crying for their

youth, nor are they crying for having lost their parents forever. They are shaken by a violent fear. They are afraid of everything that might happen in this strange world. Having been stunned by their initial glimpse into this world, the life they have now entered feels quite daunting.” They have entered the “moment to turn into adults.” According to Belinsky, this is a sudden change that every decent child will face. Before that, everyone treats them as children, and they see themselves as children. No matter how unsatisfactory the family environment is, parents and adults will always do their best to take care of the children. But by adolescence, they are no longer willing to be treated as children.



Their eyes grow sharper, and they see the falseness, injustice, and darkness in adult society. They realize that the world they have always known is not real, and it makes them fearful and may explode or resist because of that. Huang and Zweig wrote of the real world that the children saw and that frightened them. This is of great significance to young people who are growing up. In the book *The Three Motifs of Children's Literature*, I even propose, "The highest standard for measuring the realistic factors of works of 'paternal love' is whether it is conducive to the child's smooth transition in the future 'period of separation.'" I say this because this phase is so important to the child's entire life.

Now it is possible to answer the rational questions that nagged at my mind as I read this book.

First, is *Through the Eyes of a Child* children's literature? Of course. Children's literature includes reading material for ages under sixteen years old. The higher the age of the intended reader, the closer the work is to adult literature. The life it expresses is more complex, its connotation richer, and the scene becomes bigger. This book is one such work. In the past, when I commented

on works such as *My Memories of Old Beijing* and Zhu Tianwen's *The Story of Xiao Bi*, I praised the fact that they "enable young readers to see a relatively complete world." Now, in *Through the Eyes of a Child*, we see the same thing. This work allows readers to see the complexity of humans. Before they turn into adults, children are accustomed to seeing people through simple eyes. The most urgent issue for children is to distinguish between "good" and "bad" people, but real humans are more than a mix of good and bad, so it is difficult to make such distinctions. In "Grey Rabbit," Ma Xiaowu is a bully who often picks on Bai Mao. He is the one who breaks Bai Mao's sunglasses, but when he sees Bai Mao encounter a dilemma in his life, he takes the initiative to search for his sunglasses in the small town, and even proposes that they covertly work to earn back the money for Bai Mao. He eventually goes to Shanghai alone to buy the sunglasses, finally managing to send them home, but he himself ends up saying goodbye to his schooldays forever. Bai Mao is weak, and he believes he will soon die, but when he has some small power, he is also very skilled in bullying his classmates. In "Sesame Candy," the Ma Xiaowu who returned is now more mature

and complex. He is loyal, responsible, and less prone to uttering empty words. He is daring, but also has a rascally behavior and a domineering side. He is, after all, a child. He has suffered great losses and was beaten by his family, but his unyielding spirit moves people. The most complex character is the younger sister in “Elder Sister and Younger Sister,” who nearly drives her sister into the river and drowns her, but instead is drowned in her efforts to save her sister. Her mixed feelings of love and hate for her mentally ill sister are unbearable, but they are true to life. The work allows us to see the complexity of society and the injustice of the world, and to see that even a good person cannot do everything well. Life cannot be as simple as a book. At times it is even unreasonable. But whatever the case, one must face it. While it is true that all four of the stories in the book bear this same intention, the experience of the children in the countryside in the fourth story, “Tall Gatehouse,” is most persuasive. Its protagonist, because of his natural strabismus, Wen Qinglai, is deprived of qualifying for an abacus competition that he would definitely win. It was because of a classmate’s scheme that he was not able to qualify for the competition, and the continued injustice of it led to his break

with both the city and the school. Who can say that such a blow would not strike the book’s young readers in precisely this way? For this reason, experiencing the weight of real life through reading should be a compulsory for all children.

What is the significance of such an experience? Here, we must turn to Belinsky’s argument. The greatest Russian critic of the nineteenth century said in his article “Shakespeare’s Hamlet” that a person can become an adult in two ways. One is passive, which in real life begins after an attack, like Hamlet. The other way is active, and it comes about through an extensive, arduous process of reading and through the accumulation of human experience, gradually grasping hold of the weighty mystery of life. An example of this is Goethe’s *Faustus*. Belinsky also says that before becoming adults children are mostly lofty, but after it, most become ordinary adults. “Through inner struggle and consciousness, they get rid of this discordant split and achieve harmony of the soul,” he writes, “but this is only the fate of a good person.” It should be the bound duty of children’s writers to ensure that more children consciously start their way as adults successfully, so that when they

have seen the complexity and weight of life, they will remain excellent and noble. I believe Huang Beijia's creation of *Through the Eyes of a Child* has achieved this task. We now understand why the pieces of life that are seen *Through the Eyes of a Child* will be colorful and unforgettable. When they are recalled, they will make the heart tighten and ache. This is because the vision at that time was simple and sublime, since after children grew up, they could maintain another type of more reliable simplicity and

sublimity. This required the correspondence between the eyes and mind of a child. This is the correspondence between childhood's illusory sublimity and the hard and great sublimity of real life. Good literature is the best reflection of this correspondence.



## The Light and Darkness of Childhood —Huang Beijia's Novel *Through the Eyes of a Child*

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*for Children's Literature*

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In reading Huang Beijia's new novel *Through the Eyes of a Child*, I feel I am reading a contemporary version of *Hulan River Chronicles*, or perhaps a Chinese version of *A Tree in Brooklyn*. Naturally, *Through the Eyes of a Child* has its very unique light, atmosphere, and strength. Emanating from the clean, gentle eyes of the girl, Duo'er, the light and darkness of childhood are reflected, while in the background lingers the dust rolled up on the flat ground of Renzi Lane in the 1970s.

In the world of contemporary Chinese children's literature, it is very rare for a children's novel to be able to depict a child's life that is so true to life. It does not deliberately play up the poetry of childhood, nor does it purposefully exaggerate its games. It does not set out to explore the philosophical notions of childhood through

lyricism, symbols, metaphors, or other common techniques that can make a novel a little more elegant or advanced. Instead, it depicts real childhood, a simple and coarse life brimming with laughter and tears, love and hate, letting it emerge and turn around through this world's ages. Whether a face of joy mixed with sorrow or the lonely shadow of someone parting will all remain in our heart. Through the eyes of childhood, we finally catch sight of it all in clear detail. And when we catch sight of it, we know what heartbreaking nostalgia means.

This novel is a poem that the author has carefully crafted of her heartfelt childhood memories. The four nursery rhymes are naturally and cleverly linked up as four stories: "Grey Rabbit," "Elder Sister and Younger Sister," "Sesame Candy,"

and “Tall Gatehouse.” These children’s verses have a bright rhythm and joyful tone, and are rippled with the lively melody of the simple times of childhood. Unrestrained and carefree, they are like an echo at the beginning of life’s tunnel, circling, hovering, and unlocking a dampened period. However, the story that spreads does not follow the flow of this melody, joyous the entire way, but instead encounters many unexpected gullies, whirlpools, beatings, and detours. Children’s songs and stories, like preludes and main melodies, echo one another. Even more, they are in contrast. The content of each story is more mottled and heavy because of the lightness or simplicity of the previous children’s songs.

Indeed, the images of the children in these stories have mixed nuances and significance. The story takes place in Renzi Lane. Although life there is hard and even sinister, there is also a sense of benevolence and justice being transmitted in twists and turns. It is not only reflected in the kindness of mutual help among the adults in the neighborhood, like Aunt Hao and the matriarch of the Zhao family, but also in the gradually conscious understanding of a child. In a period of

hardship, responsibility landed too early on those immature shoulders.

The key character in the novel is one of the protagonists, a young girl, Duo’er, who reflects the childhood of the author. The author gives her the gentle, beautiful name of “Duo’er” (which means flower in Chinese) because she has a gentle, beautiful heart. The child is extremely kind and sensitive, and cannot stand around her to be unhappy. She feels the pain of others and always tries to soothe and relieve it, but is often prevented from doing so by her own timidity or weakness. Sometimes, though, a friendship she values motivates her to come out of her shell and act like a hero. In the four stories, Duo’er moves from age ten to eleven, with a childhood innocence that has not yet vanished on the verge of entering the world. In one perplexing occasion which shocks her, her eyes are opened wide and she begins to scrutinize and discern life. She also gradually grows psychologically after witnessing the misfortune of her companions and the complexity of life, and she harbors a bitter and indescribable sentiment. The story mainly develops from her bright, pure perspective, seeing Bai Mao, Ma Xiaowu, the Younger Sister, Ximei, Wen Qinglai

and the other children come into her life and then leave. These kids endure all kinds of frustrations and bitterness. This child's eyes reflect good and evil, laughter and tears, love and hate, cruelty and kindness, suffering and endurance, helplessness and struggle, compromise and resistance, groans and cries, cowardice and bravery... The concealed or overt feelings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy of the children are permeated with Duo'er's deep compassion and powerless desolation. For example, Duo'er sees the elder sister's distortion and pain when she suffers a seizure, feeling that the situation "made everything appear dilapidated, hurried, absurd, like time was at a standstill, the world was collapsing and the heart was sinking." At the end of "Elder Sister and Younger Sister," when Duo'er faces the younger sister's portrait, a sense of desolation grows. "All was lost. Duo'er knew that this part of her life, this happiest and carefree period, a childhood blossoming with fiberglass and wheat straw flowers, and flowers woven with silk thread, was accompanying the blackish grey ashes of the incense burnt to the dead, dancing and floating away." The author deliberately pulls across distant time and space, infusing the perception of adulthood naturally into Duo'er's childhood scene.

After Duo'er finishes primary school and leaves Renzi Lane, she knows nothing of the fates of the others. Later, she notes with emotion, "The world is always a problem that can't be solved. There is no formula that can be applied to it. Wherever you go, your life is there." The transformation of perspectives and time and space open up the memories here, and the changing fortunes of life will recede into childhood memories. Duo'er likewise goes from a "song of innocence" to a "song of experience." Growth is the metamorphosis of a butterfly that has emerged from the cleansing of suffering and the test of pain.

Reading the stories of Bai Mao, Ma Xiaowu, the sisters, Ximei, and Wen Qinglai, one cannot help but being fascinated by the author's observation of the many faces and secluded music of a child's heart and humanity. The hate of Bai Mao, who suffers a mysterious illness, towards the classmates who reject him causes shock and dismay to Duo'er. Duo'er sees a sense of inferiority, helplessness, and determination to take revenge underneath his arrogance and aloofness. This makes her realize that "all who are pathetic have something to hate," while noting that the reverse is equally true. The devil incarnate,

Ma Xiaowu, aside from being vicious and overbearing, also performs good deeds of justice. He shows a rare conciliation when he finds out that Bai Mao is about to die. To return Bai Mao his sunglasses, he takes the trouble to earn money by smashing bricks and steps forward to help Ximei, who is backed into a tight corner, sell sesame candy. Even though he is outrageous and even a little of a scoundrel, he also has a generous and gallant heart which earns him special respect. The author's pen exercises great compassion as she describes the difficulties encountered by each child, writing respectfully of their individual struggles against fate. After the family has undergone a change, Ximei wants to make something of her life and so does not give in to rumors, continuing instead to believe in the goodwill of Ma Xiaowu. She thus leaves her hometown with him to seek their fortunes. The boy who traveled from the countryside to the city, Wen Qinglai, who suffers from strabismus, is alone and feels inferior, but after becoming visible because of his abacus skills and long-distance running, he gains confidence, only to ultimately lose out to a devious opponent, missing the opportunity to make a change and get his life on track. He returns to the countryside to continue his life of poverty,

which may be a more suitable life for him. As these children have grown up in hard times and made serious life choices, they have all displayed an impressive quality, an unwillingness to yield to the misfortunes in their fate.

Among the four stories, the complex personality of the harsh, cruel Younger Sister is the most memorable. The characterization of this thirteen-year-old girl brings to mind Lu Xun's evaluation of Dostoyevsky's masterpiece of Russian literature, *Crime and Punishment*. In Lu Xun's opinion, Dostoyevsky's greatness is his ability to "put the men and women in the novel into an uncomfortable situation, to test them, not only stripping off the pureness on the surface, pointing out the evil hidden below, but also teasing out the real purity that lies beneath the evil." The writer also uses the child's eyes of Duo'er to let the Younger Sister's "real purity below the evil shine." The grievances over her family's embarrassment and the bitter anger towards her mentally ill Elder Sister who brought her shame give birth to an evil devil in her little soul. She once even pushes her sister into the river to drown her, but then jumps in after her and calls people to come to her rescue. Younger

Sister is mean and vicious, wishing for her sister's death, but when she sees her sister being abused by her in-laws, she is moved to pity. She refuses to give in to her own youth and fear of violence, but instead steps in to save her sister. Ultimately she gives her own life to protect her. As Duo'er stares at the photo of the Younger Sister, she feels she is looking at "a fascinating fox, who is arrogant and looks coldly upon people." This ingenious, extremely ambitious, and unlucky girl is mired in her fate. Through various longings for a good life, conjectures about fox spirits, and great effort to change her predicament, even if she has selfish motives or overwhelming arrogance, she still draws Duo'er to her. Duo'er experiences a friendship with the Younger Sister that waxes and wanes, but it is never abandoned. Due to this intimacy, she also clearly sees the deep-rooted generosity and tender compassion hidden deep in the soul of the Younger Sister, covered with a hard shell and dirt. It is this young, compassionate child who helps us catch a sight through her caring heart which refuses to withdraw.

Duo'er's child's eyes witness all the chaos of real life and inner world of children. That world is not always as bright and

clear as we imagine. Various shadows can overwhelm it, and the sadness in the dark can even surge into rivers. Who will discover this? Who will show compassion? Who will provide counseling? In the story, there is virtually no adult guidance. The children are left groping in the dark, looking for the direction their growth should take, even through blood and tears. Thus, a story of this sort has a power which has burst out from the source of life. No matter how dark life is, it must continue to move forward. For this reason, in the ending of the final story, "Tall Gatehouse," the writer brings the story to a close with the figure of the little girl, Wen Xilai, who takes over Wen Qinglai going to the city, leaping about like a bird, saying joyously, "I like it! I'm looking forward..." This strong ending is truly inspired. It is not only the ending to "Tall Gatehouse," but to the entire collection of four stories. It can be seen as having a "two for one" impact. All the previous suffering is lightly, skillfully bound up, and an endless simple hope is returned to the children, giving them back the long life that is soon to spread out before them. After all, whether it is the story or life, what really needs to be planted in the heart is love and hope.

*Through the Eyes of a Child* is a true illumination of the wounds and pains we hide in our hearts. It is also a reflection of the warmth and love we bear there, as well as of the strength and beauty pressing on the heart. The four stories in the book are stand-alone, but the characters depicted in each one sometimes intersect. Throughout the surface of the entire work is life suffering, but the author does not embellish it or blur it. Instead, she uses small, fragmented portraits of reality as interludes. The bathtub and dining table in the alley in the summer, the washing and gossiping beside the well, the busy period of Lunar New Year preparations, the Younger Sister's dense needlework of crocheting, and the entire craft of Ximei's sesame candy production all create busy real scenes of life, as if depicted in a film. The author has the superb skill of portraying everyday picture scrolls, like capturing an enemy with ease, because these are familiar

home scenes that have been steamed and braised over and over again in the cooking fire of her memory. The story of suffering is deeply rooted in the soil of humanity, so it is not confusing, illusory, or erratic. This foundation makes for a relaxed rhythm with natural fluctuations like the flow of life. What is remarkable about the book is its linguistic flexibility. The author's mastery of language is on full display in this novel. Whether it is descriptive or narrative, it is simple and concise. Even if stripped of all ornament, the writer can bring out every grain of rice and dirt in ordinary life, every curved line of a twinkle and smile deep in the heart of the character, setting it all before our eyes, and even reaching our hearts.

Thus, we are allowed to truly see the light and darkness of childhood, standing respectfully before us in the dust-swept world.



## Narrating Childhood Through History —Huang Beijia's *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series*

*Zhao Xia and Fang Weiping, respectively Ph. D. and Professor at Children's Literature Research Institute of Zhejiang Normal University*

Huang Beijia's new works of long fiction, the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series*, set in five specific years, contain the writing ambition, to record and reproduce certain social interactions and historical background of Chinese children over a century. The changing historical circumstances that began in the twentieth century provide a unique background for the narratives of childhood contained in these novels. Against this backdrop, the writer focuses on the daily lives of five ordinary households, dedicating the most intense portrayals to the boys and girls in these families. Seen through the veil of childhood, the harshness of history is eliminated. A kind of historical experience closer to the fate of ordinary people in the neighborhood and the feelings of childhood is gradually delineated throughout the text. At the same time, in the exquisite atmosphere of the novel's historical narrative, we grab hold of

a thin line, as fine as a spider's thread. It is the bright, soft resilience of childhood fate.

### I

The story begins in the 1920s in a small town called Qingyang. The experiences of an eight-year-old girl, Meixiang, opens the narrative chain of this novel series. In this novel, entitled *Grass Bracelet*, the writer puts on display several of the important features of the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series*, particularly the location and the age of the protagonists, which unifies all the stories in the series. Of course, the most important element that makes the five novels in the series — *Grass Bracelet*, *White Cotton Flower*, *Sing-Sing-So*, *Black Eyes*, and *Christmas Eve* — an integrated whole is this historical thread running through them. Each narrative focuses on a specific historical year in the 1920s, 1940s, 1960s, 1980s, and the first decade of our century.

Each illustrates the lives and historical background of children living in that era. In this way, when the five works are read together, they constitute a vivid portrayal of the changes in childhood and the historical cycles of the past century.

In these works, Huang seeks to present a historical account of ordinary individual children and their daily experiences, scattered on the margins of history. Trapped between the teeth of the fast-moving gears of history, the fates and experiences of these ordinary children who are faltering often appear small and insignificant. This is the historical experience of ordinary individuals who are easily forgotten in mainstream discourse, and it is also the substance that, often neglected, has been accumulating for a long time in the river of historical recollection and literary writing. Without a doubt, the heartfelt experience and memory of ordinary girls like Meixiang of the tranquil year of 1924 would not have been permitted to enter the solemn historical narratives. Those memories of ordinary children such as Xiaomi and Aiwan, of 1967 and 1982, filled with the basic, mundane flavors of life, would not have easily entered grand historical commentaries. In addition, because the

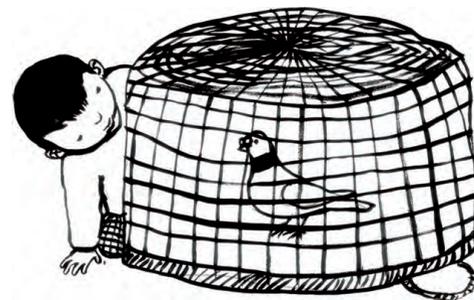
memories belong to young children who are not experienced in the affairs of the world, they are rarely brought into the general field of literary narration. But as some unique existence, their experiences have formed another dimension, which is just as important to historical narration. What Huang strives for in her work is to depict a kind of unique experience that truly belongs to children of each historical period, events, and lives: the tiny narratives that appear unremarkable after history has manifested itself in the middles of a child's life in its most concrete form.

## II

When history is inextricably linked to children's feelings, experiences, emotions, and will, the form and image of childhood naturally become central to the novel's historical narrative.

Applying pen and ink to depict the changes in childhood over the past century is the most striking feature of this series of children's novels. In shaping and polishing, combining and arranging the images of childhood of a specific historical period, the author succeeds in writing about childhood in two dimensions. On the horizontal axis of history, she presents

the pluralistic aspects of childhood in five different historical periods. This sort of presentation sometimes uses contrast as a technique. For instance, in *Grass Bracelet*, set in the 1920s, the author depicts Xiuxiu, a child bride who has laughed and played with Meixiang and finally commits suicide to escape her mother-in-law's punishment. In contrast, Meixiang is permitted to enter the new school, which hints at the disparity between two completely different forms of female childhood in an era where the old and the new culture coexisted. At other times, parallelisms are used. For example, the childhoods between Kejian, who lived in the 1940s, and Xiaomi, who lived in the 1960s, and their peers and siblings of the same age form a conflict-free juxtaposition. Sometimes these two methods are used simultaneously, with juxtapositions and intersections of different childhoods creating a map of childhood that has no longer a single, homogeneous, and flat, perspective but is instead rich, diverse, and profound. It takes the interpretation of the complexity and diversity of real childhood as far as possible. At the same time, on the vertical axis of history, the novels artistically present the diachronic changes of childhood over the past century. Through these changes in children's life, we can



follow the footprints that link modern and contemporary Chinese history. At this point, the novels present another gesture toward their narrative breakthrough. In the process of depicting and shaping these children's images, the writer's attitude clearly avoids the "little hero" pattern common at one time in contemporary children's novels. In the five works, the boys and girls who are the protagonists are all ordinary children. They possess the ingenuity and the various weaknesses that belong to the realm of childhood. They rarely exert themselves for great deeds, but instead simply live ordinary lives. This type of character is obviously different from the protagonists in traditional children's novels, and it is precisely this kind of character that is given value in the novels. The author seems to believe that only by departing from the mainstream discourse and entering the most common, normal childhood events and contexts can the traditional narrative be overcome and the true and crude child

identity of individual children be restored. This choice vividly reflects the writer's position that the expression in children's novels must return to the simple, ordinary life of childhood and to the child's everyday world.

### III

Just as the author has turned these novels into an expression of the daily lives of ordinary children, we notice on the linguistic level that a special narrative strategy has quietly formulated and played a key role. The work first appears as a scattered narrative technique similar to the composition of traditional Chinese paintings. By weakening the dramatic style that the plots of children's novels usually follow, these works pay more attention to expressing children's real impressions. They explore the process of children's cognition of the world through the natural transition of time and events. In the background of children characters, the color of daily life becomes more intense. At the same time, the message about real children and real life also is literarily highlighted. This largely conforms to the intention of presenting history and shaping the characters as mentioned above. In Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and

Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, being the child protagonist means being the hero of the entire story. By contrast, life is obviously moving at an uncontrollable and ineffable speed for Xiaomi, who lives in the 1960s, and also for Ren Xiaoxiao and those living in the early 2000s. They are observers and participants in life, but they are far from being its center. They are a reflection of many children's real situation. Putting childhood in the whirlpool of real life, we can more clearly see the innumerable "bubbles," questions that are difficult to explain. These are brought up by history in the ordinary lives of the children. We also see the real privations, the courage, and the warmth that children embody.

Responding to this, the narrative language of the novels mainly comes from the children's perspective and sounds like daily conversation. Just like the ordinary life that these novels are dedicated to, this narrative is free, fluid, and homely, often even just offering an outline description of some phenomena or details from daily life. However, in the casual narration of these stories, we often find they are filled with emotions that are restrained, tight, and full of tension, making these descriptions

very interesting. It adds a more thought-provoking meaning to the historical content and childhood sentiment expressed in its simplicity, which gives everyday life and the otherwise plain vision of childhood a profound meaning and unique charm.



## Beyond Childhood —Huang Beijia's New Children's Novels

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Looking at the milestones of contemporary children's literature to examine long novels of children's fiction, Cao Wenxuan's *Grass House* is undoubtedly one of the pioneering artistic works. Based upon the author's own childhood experiences, it has a poetic internal structure. The writer shows the freedom and self-sufficiency of the world of childhood. At the same time, he expresses the political structures and social complexities of the nation during a particular period through the perspective of children, extending the tentacles of long children's novels to a deeper dimension of life. The *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series* bears a certain artistic resemblance to *Grass House*, in that its author, Huang Beijia, has the same conscious expression as Cao Wenxuan in terms of the complexities of the adult world as discovered by children. However, the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series* has experimented more and made more

victories from an artistic perspective. It can be argued that this series is a pinnacle in contemporary children's fiction: it embodies inherent tensions in four important aspects not easily attained by other long-form children's fiction.

### I

The first of these aspects comes in the delicate structure of the story. Huang has extended the narrative space of this children's fiction over the span of a century, making it more three-dimensional and historically more profound. Meixiang, Kejian, Xiaomi, Aiwan, and Ren Xiaoxiao are the five eight-year-olds who give the series its name. These children are the protagonists of *Grass Bracelet*, *White Cotton Flower*, *Sing-Sing-So*, *Black Eyes*, and *Christmas Eve*. The stories are respectively set in 1924, 1944, 1967, 1982, and 2009. They present five different

perspectives, analyzing the state of childhood in the different ages and societies in which these children live. The five novels are both independent and coherent. Each can be read separately or they can be read as five parts of one story. Together, they mark the changes that occurred in the lives of children over the span of a century, depicting the historical fate and life trajectory of Chinese children and the changes in Chinese society.

The second aspect is the presentation of the narratives' temperate beauty. In creating long works, the greatest fear is the exaltation of language and emotion, which requires moderation. But temperance in language, emotion, and narrative is difficult to maintain through the course of writing novels. Huang manages temperance in a creative way.

The third aspect arises from the images that the writer deploys as scenery. All stories are based in Qingyang, a small town south of the Yangtze River. The changes in people and events of this small city in different eras are used to reflect the transformations of the entire society. This approach is a way of enriching the images and giving them a symbolic meaning.

Finally, the writer puts great effort into shaping the characters. She has not only created a series of unforgettable children, but has also exerted a great influence in adults.

## II

The discovery of childhood and the reverence towards innocence are likewise key features of the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series*. Huang Beijia is a writer with great artistic consciousness. In fact, based on the themes of the works, she could have restructured these five stories according to a unique subject matter, but instead she combined them closely, and then split them into a series, obviously giving herself a greater burden. She possesses the ability, the artistic cultivation, the level to grasp big subjects, and the skill to create and artistic expression of childhood. One of the goals of Huang's creations is to highlight the child's consciousness of life and offer enough description of the state of life in childhood. For this reason, in these five novels, we find her careful observations and surprising discoveries of the children's world.

Huang's discovery of the world of childhood and reverence for children

are manifested in three ways. First, she expresses the child's nature. Second, we see her love and compassion along with empathy for suffering children. The final way is the discovery of children's wisdom and the expression of their power in life. In *Christmas Eve*, Ren Xiaoxiao is an adorable, respectable boy. His father is an Internet writer of "the 1980s generation." His website is called "Otaku." Though he had graduated from the Department of Chinese at a key university and could have found a good job when he finished school, Xiaoxiao's father loved his freedom, so opted not to hold down a formal job. He spends every night in front of his computer, helping movie stars manage their blogs so he can earn some money to live on. Xiaoxiao's grandfather is the director of a company, and he lacks confidence in his own son. His mother, Song Yuting, is a very fashionable woman who loves the good life, but Xiaoxiao's father cannot satisfy her material desires, so they divorce. Xiaoxiao lives with his father. He has learned to take care of himself, and to take care of this father as well. He develops the habits and abilities of independent thought and living. His is not fragile or mentally ill, as children in divorced families are often represented in children's fiction. When his father is

invited to serve as a literature teacher at a detention house, Xiaoxiao's grandparents are not optimistic. Xiaoxiao is the only one who encourages him and helps him build up his confidence. This is the power of the child, which shows a child's guidance and support for the adult world. The discovery of childhood and the expression of wisdom in a child's growth demonstrate that Huang is a writer with humane feelings. Her creative prowess is inseparable from her care and love for the world of childhood.

### III

Huang Beijia's *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series* displays some obvious characteristics of epic writing. This is both a challenge to marketization and a resistance to the trend of entertainment in children's literature. In the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series*, she focuses first on the description of folk culture and regional culture, then on the reflection about the epoch, and finally on the expression of social implications for children's fiction. The *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series* looks back on history, but it is not a plain rehashing of the writer's own childhood experiences. Huang looks forward to a kind of children's novel writing with a greater sense of history. She is unwilling to present children's lives as

the primary essence of creating fiction. She pursues a vaster artistic line of thought and places children in a historical and cultural field. Within that context, she extracts the experience of the group from the history of early individual. She describes their lives and expresses their thoughts, and even more, presents their lifestyle in different life situations and eras. This has given children's fiction a deeper sense of history and a more profound cultural space.

#### IV

There is an idealistic feel to the *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series*. That is to say, Huang tries to make the novels transcend the world of childhood in writing, becoming a dialogue between childhood and era, children and society, and individuals and history. Whether from the perspective of the world's classics of children's literature, children's novels, or fairy tales, all have displayed the coherence of the world and the complexities of adult life. In depicting the world of childhood, at the same time the writer calls to the child's consciousness of life and discovers the wisdom of the growing child, the writer also endows children's fiction with a broader artistic view and cultural examination, and also provides children stories with greater

humanistic care and penetrating values.

Children's literature should not just write about the world of children, but also reflect the about world and express it in a way that is more consistent with the aesthetic ways of children. This is a true test of the artistic level of a children's literature writer. In fact, children grow up in three environments: the natural environment, the human environment, and their inner world. The *Five Eight-Year-Olds Series* successfully observes the human environment in which children grow up. Huang also realizes that the adult environment is the key to restricting or determining the quality of children's life. For this reason, when we read *Christmas Eve*, we see Xiaoxiao's father portrayed as a very childlike "Generation X" who loves life, insists on his own individuality, sticks to his own beliefs. Not wanting to live an ordinary life, he discovers the best human environment for children to grow up: a world that enables them to communicate with adults, even if that world is not rich or luxurious.



Selected Illustrations from Huang Beijia's Books

## The Love between a Mother and a Son —Huang Beijia's Novel *A Kiss For Mom*

*Tang Rui, Member of the China Writers Association*

It's no wonder that I like the novel *A Kiss for Mom*, especially considering the increasingly commercial nature we see in the children's literary world today. Some writers and publishers of children's literature have involuntarily surrendered to the trend of commercialization. In some cases, people actually play up the markers of "commercial writing." When I see a children's novel that is more serious and pure, I cannot help but being impressed.

There are two main reasons I like this novel. The first is that it draws near to children's themes and techniques of expression. *A Kiss for Mom* is a relatively realistic description of children's life in today's cities. It portrays their environment (both external and internal), their life conditions (material as well as spiritual), their difficulties (physical and psychological), their emotions... And

this is not only true in *A Kiss for Mom*. We similarly see such characteristics in the various works making up the *Huang Beijia Fiction Series* introduced by the Jiangsu Children's Literature Association such as *I Will Be a Good Child*, *I'm a Flag Raiser Today*, and *I'm Flying*. The real life existence of today's urban children that we encounter in Huang's works is described at a close range, whether in the home or at school. These descriptions are serious and even delicate. For instance, the process by which Didi and his mother move from estrangement to intimacy is both delicate and realistic, and very touching. Another example is Didi's classmate, Zhang Xiaochen, who suffers from Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder because he is overly anxious about his studies and bites his nails to the point that the others call him "Bloody Claws."



The second main reason I am fond of the novel is that it has deeper literary connotations and attains certain literary achievement. The author has not lowered herself to the same level of aesthetics and spirit as her young readers. She does not take satisfying children's curiosity or addressing market interests as the sole criteria for creative success. She does not regard telling a pleasant and amusing story as her only pursuit, but instead demonstrates the artistic sensibility, depth of thought, and social responsibility an artist should

have. I think this is especially important at this moment, and is particularly worth advocating. It sounds a little funny and a little sad, but we really must appeal to children's authors and advocate that they not lower the artistic level and write only for the sake of the market. At a time when electronic media are increasingly occupying children's reading time and children's books are becoming more and more like the entertainment equivalent of fast food, outstanding children's literature plays an important role in helping children

achieve more balance between electronic media and books in their development.

*A Kiss for Mom* explores the serious theme of the perplexity of humanity that is so prevalent in today's society. The specific symptoms are varying degrees of many modern urban ailments. In the novel's characters, we see varying levels of psychological problems, including in the "white-haired old man," Didi's teacher. The only psychologically healthier character in the story is the hardware store owner, Wei Dongping. The author employs a process and expression that young readers can understand to present the subject, but she is never frivolous or caricatural. She shows us the social roots the individual cannot contend or reconcile with, hidden beneath each psychological problem. At the same time, she allows us to see that even though we cannot eliminate these roots, the love that remains in the depth of the human soul is a good way to regulate, and balance the worst expressions of those psychological ills and save us from them. Even when that love is temporarily obscured by hatred and narrow-mindedness or suppressed by the pressure of competition to survive, it will never die out. As long as there are people who spread them, like Didi and

Wei Dongping, the sparks of love will become the force of a prairie fire, melting the hard ice formed for different reasons in people's hearts. Such themes and such unique expression are exactly what today's society needs to help young readers grow up healthily.



## Have You Ever Kissed Your Mother? —A Kiss for Mom

*Cui Daoyi, Chief Editor of People's Literature*

“All humans are originally good.” In this saying, the first sentence in the *Three Character Classic*, the original nature of human life is expressed. When people come into the world, they are a blank page. Over time, they become stained with the dust of human experience, turning into a colorful picture.

In the natural course of humanity, family occupies the primary position. Therefore, affirming, promoting, and praising family ties has essentially become the primary task of writers, especially those working in children's literature. It is said that Huang Beijia was “sitting at home immersed in her thoughts” when she suddenly realized the significance and the function of affection. The phrase “a kiss for Mom” emerged from this affection. It was a sacred verse. She felt it was not so much a concept as an inspiration. Inspiration is the spark of

genius which erupts when an author enters the realm of art after accumulating a series of humane feelings and social ideals.

Huang Beijia's artistic conception is savvy and proficient. Now that she had realized the significance and function of affection, she started writing about its lack. The absence of affection, seen through the eyes of a writer with rich experience and deep emotions whose main responsibility is creating children's literature gave birth to two characters. She paid great attention to them: a child with mild autism and a woman with mild depression. These two people couldn't but be mother and son.

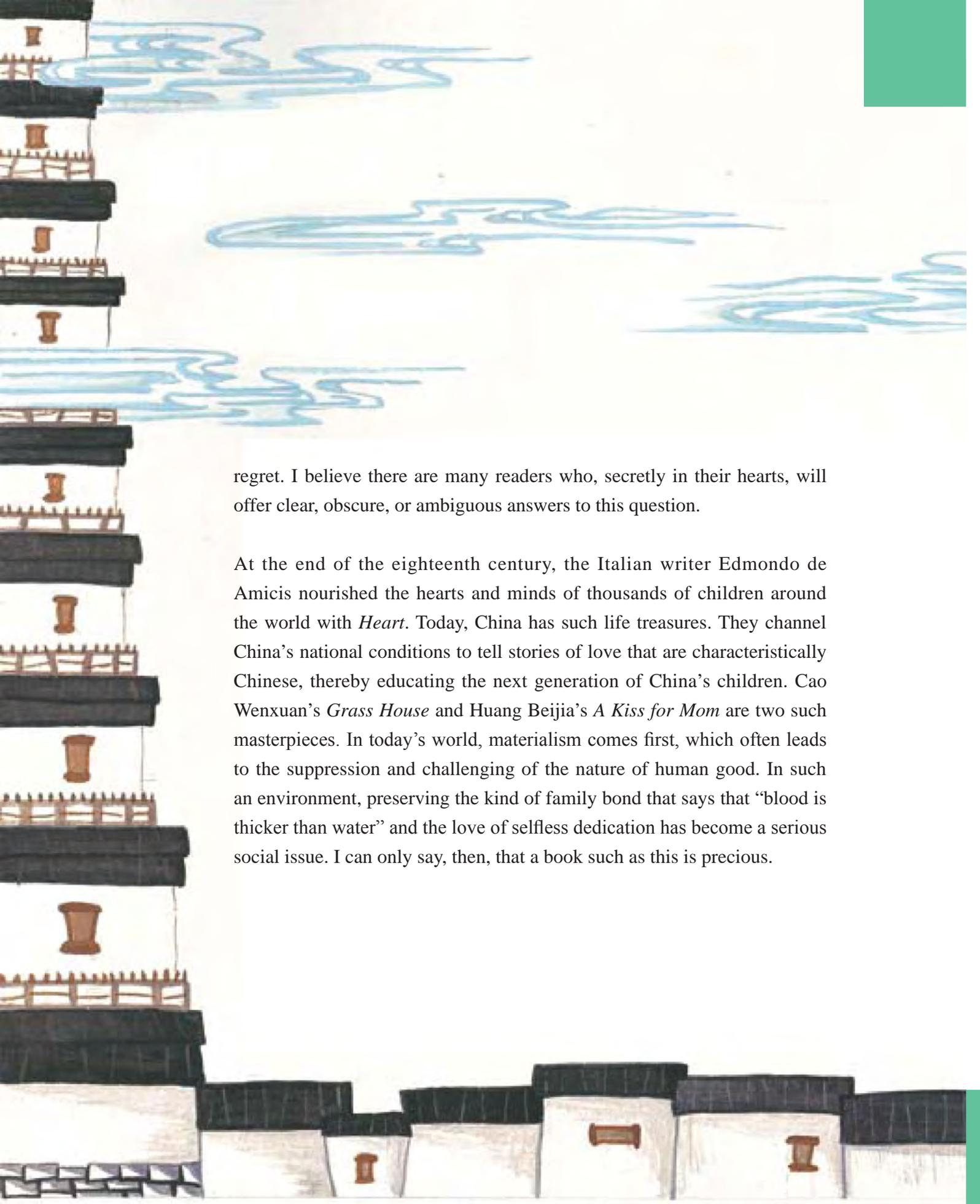
Taking this lack of affection as a stairway, Huang Beijia began to climb the winding mountain path to the highest point. She felt the loss and coldness, worrying about the crisis and turning point; calling to awaken

the affection, for a reaction; sighing at its return; expressing heartily how blood is thicker than water. As a result, the other characters and plots and real life itself come in like a lightning, striking without hesitation, becoming touching details and developing into an engrossing plot.

The mother's message is delivered through "the sweet orange flower." She says, "You give me so much trouble," which indicates a certain blame. But in the ears of the son, that expression also contains love. When the son shouts haltingly at his mother, all he receives is "an unreasonable remark." When he sees his mother's palm flying toward the cheek of the boy who has hurt him, "the pain suddenly stopped, and he was enveloped in a warm heat." These unique details affectionately demonstrate "something between mothers and their children that others cannot see, but which only mother and child can feel." From the first moment the mother's fingers touched the son's face, he "was awake with joy" to which he "woke cautiously." We read that "he wanted to keep the golden moment of this morning, imprinted it on his heart." As his teacher notes, "He approaches life with a keen, grateful heart, so his life must be richer than others."

The same is true for Huang Beijia, the creator of this artistic, spiritual beauty. She notes, "Each book is a life, a face, and a collection of dreams." She feels that "when I write, I have lived vicariously through many people. I have enjoyed it. My own life is increasingly enriched by it." Indeed, "the charm of writing" is the power and vitality of creation produced by life and the true beauty of life condensed in the writer's own heart. Therefore, Huang places O. Hery's *The Last Leaf* on the mother's window. Huang Beijia succeeds remarkably in creating Didi, the boy who pursues affection, is devoted to it, and ultimately obtains the deep love he deserves. In the field of children's literature, Didi can be described as a good-hearted character who gives out affection. In real life, many children may be spoiled in the family, but they not necessarily know what affection is about.

For this reason, we must educate our children about what it is to love. Teaching about love is an open topic with a wide range of ideas to address. This begins with the affection between mother and child. After reading this book, I asked myself: "Have I ever kissed my mother?" It is a question that can be pleasant, sad, or full of



regret. I believe there are many readers who, secretly in their hearts, will offer clear, obscure, or ambiguous answers to this question.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the Italian writer Edmondo de Amicis nourished the hearts and minds of thousands of children around the world with *Heart*. Today, China has such life treasures. They channel China's national conditions to tell stories of love that are characteristically Chinese, thereby educating the next generation of China's children. Cao Wenxuan's *Grass House* and Huang Beijia's *A Kiss for Mom* are two such masterpieces. In today's world, materialism comes first, which often leads to the suppression and challenging of the nature of human good. In such an environment, preserving the kind of family bond that says that "blood is thicker than water" and the love of selfless dedication has become a serious social issue. I can only say, then, that a book such as this is precious.

## A Book You Cannot Miss—*I Will Be a Good Child*

*Huang Yuhuang, Vice-Chairperson of Jiangsu Critics Association*

I have taken my own experience and careful attention to the reading of this new work by Huang Beijia. I went through the war in my childhood, was a young man during the Cultural Revolution (I had already become a father), and have now entered old age in prosperous times (now I have a grandson). Therefore, at times over the past few years I have indulged in a few sighs over wasting time and running out of it, feeling that I have up in the face of difficulties and became a good-for-nothing. Besides the subjective reasons like being “a young man idle,” I believe there are other, inevitable reasons why people fall into the claws of wasting time.

I do not mean to say that war or disasters like the Cultural Revolution led to a certain time wasting among an entire generation. I have been a bit worried time

and again about today’s generation of children. Perhaps it is because, besides having been a student, I have also been a senior teacher and parent. They may be suffering a different sort of time waste and this “killer” may just be us: teachers who teach tirelessly and parents who have great ambitions for their children.

It was against this psychological background that I read *I Will Be a Good Child*, and I felt it both very real and very sincere. I am not saying that this work of children’s literature is only for the purpose of addressing a social problem. I do, however, think that this novel hits a major reality that should not be ignored, but often is: a major subject about the growth of children. In this sense, *I Will Be a Good Child* should not only be called a timely book, but also a social reference book with

value in multiple areas.

The young hero of the novel, Jin Ling, of distinctive character, and her classmates, along with their respectable teachers and lovely parents, are quite typical of the actual living environment and conditions of today's children, presenting a microcosm of that world. Jin Ling is an intelligent, pure, honest sixth-grade girl who is both kind and full of love and longing for life. The novel's inner conflict is manifested in the frictions and psychological antagonism between her and her school and family environments. On the one hand, children who want to be "good" are required to use their own eyes and scale to promote their will of life and expand their own spiritual existence. On the other hand, for teachers and parents, the only objective to pursue and the sole way to determine the worth of children are grades and the school they are admitted into. For this reason, the affection of "sorrowful parents" and the expectations of devoted teachers turn into overwhelming amounts of homework and endless examinations. These aim for a single target: acting as a distorting and oppressing force that ignores the essence of children as a complete—though immature—life.

People will probably not object generally to the idea that people need pressure. This includes children. Similarly, most will not simply deny the correctness of good nature of a parent's or a teacher's desire for a child to get good grades and be promoted. The only problem is that, for children, if the pressure is manifested as constant oppression and is not transformed into a form of self-imposed duty, it will only lead to a comedy or a tragedy.

One of the successes and remarkable features of this book is its use of such comedy and tragedy. The "hide and seek" between Jin Ling and her mother Zhao Huizi appeals to children both in a playful and a rational way. The mother is a caring, well-educated intellectual, and the daughter is a good child who is honest and eager to learn. But because there is only one standard for being a good child and that single target of good grades, with the exam rankings always placed in the middle, the "hide and seek" between mother and daughter directly or evasively falls into a pattern. It can easily make one think of a cat and a mouse, or a cop and a thief. Reading this is like receiving a sudden "shock" while one is idling at home with the family. How can one ignore

that children are first and foremost living beings? How can one so blatantly ignore the rules when it comes to them? What degree of distortion and damage has been caused? The first thing that has been hurt is the self-esteem, which is the driving force for learning, and the confidence, which is a requisite for any sort of success.

When the author expresses this sort of injury, she is undoubtedly very conscious and very pained by it. The work employs two characters to express sorrow consciously through literature. First, Jin Ling's father, Jin Yiming, is more like a bystander in the child's education. In fact, his words and behavior are unconscious reminders of the core and essentials embodied in ancient maxims or precepts left by Confucius, like adapting the way of teaching to the student's aptitude, or educating the students according to their nature. Another character is the retired teacher, the elderly Ms. Sun. Her sudden appearance in the child's life causes Jin Ling's results in math class to rise very quickly. It is precisely the establishment of trust that stimulates the child's self-esteem and confidence.

I have always believed that excellent

children's literature not only has to avoid "topics unsuitable to adults," but should in fact generate more interest, richer rational consciousness, and artistic pleasure in adult readers. However, Huang Beijia's novel is not without limitation. For instance, it focuses more on the survival perplexity and awkward situations of children who study, and it mostly pays attention to the family and school. So aside from this, Huang Beijia does not actually include very important and broader social factors influencing the children in real life today in the structure or scope of her book. But this obviously does not prevent the book from becoming a book of revelation that can touch all sectors of society. I urge children, teachers, and parents alike to read this work, so that children can become good children and we can become good teachers and parents.

## The Confusion of Good Children

*Fei Zhenzhong, Member of the China Writers Association*

This novel about what it is to be a good child is in fact a story about the anxieties and confusion people generally feel today. The book's author, Huang Beijia, was herself the parent of a school-aged child when she wrote it. She was the mother of a school aged-child who had just finished sixth grade, and a strict guardian. She obviously experienced the same anxieties and confusion endured by all parents. The hero of her novel, Jin Ling, is based on Huang's own daughter. We have heard the writer tell the most wonderful and moving stories from the novel, which leave one lamenting and helpless at the same time.

The sixth grade is an important time marker for those twelve-year-old children who are entering this period. Each day of the year, the eyes of all their teachers and parents are on them. Behind this gaze is the firm will of the adults. Without exception,

they ask their children to be good children who will perform well academically and gain admittance into a good school. There is only one standard that determines who is a "good child" in sixth grade: receiving good grades on school-work and test papers given to parents for their signatures. However, the words "good child" have become an unbearable burden for these children. Everything outside of their education—all the playfulness, fun, games, and even mischievousness that they should possess—has been removed.

The girl in the novel, Jin Ling, is one such child who has unfortunately reached the sixth grade. She was formerly an easygoing, happy, lively girl who had a wide range of interests, was filled with love for the world and had a broad imagination. Her grades would not be called good, but neither are they bad. She pursues her

own interests in her studies. She favors Chinese, and when she is interested, she can write really outstanding compositions, far ahead of her class. She is weak in Math. She finds numbers boring, and calculation is a problem for her on tests, resulting in low grades. This is not a big ordeal. Everyone who knows a little about the principles of education knows it is a common phenomenon. However, when one is in sixth grade, it is a serious flaw. The problem is significant enough that it makes her mother feel desperate. She fears her daughter will not be able to enter a good middle school if her results in Math are so poor, or that she will only be able to get into a bad school. Now, not yet twelve years old, Jin Ling understands her responsibility to be a good child. Not wanting to see her mother hopeless, she is forced to bear a psychological pressure unsuitable for her age and start the difficult sixth grade. In just one year, we see how this sixth grader experiences happiness and bitterness, joy and sadness, failures and successes that she will remember throughout her life. These feelings are not appropriate for a child of her age, but she has tasted each one in turn. Is this good or bad for her? Though Jin Ling receives guidance from a retired expert educator just before her most critical

exam and is thus finally able to fulfill her promise to be a good kid, we still feel a thick shadow hovering menacingly in her mind, which will not disappear just because she has become the good kid she hoped to be.

Perhaps we should ask what education today is all about. What led our schools, families, and societies; our teachers, parents, and peers, to be caught in this educational dilemma, knowing that what we are doing is not right, but feeling that we have no choice but to continue. There is definitely a real crisis hidden in this. The crisis is not in the school or the teachers, and it is not in the family or the parents, but in education itself. It has taken the wrong path in the fundamental goal of humanity. If education is only a future benefit and comes at the cost of the nature of the child, then this is an inhuman education. This problem is certainly not new today, but it has deepened the internal crisis of education today, and it has spread to every school and every family. In the novel, Jin Ling's mother may be aware of this problem, but she is powerless to address it. She feels great conflict and confusion in the choice between the future interests and the nature of the child, feeling that she

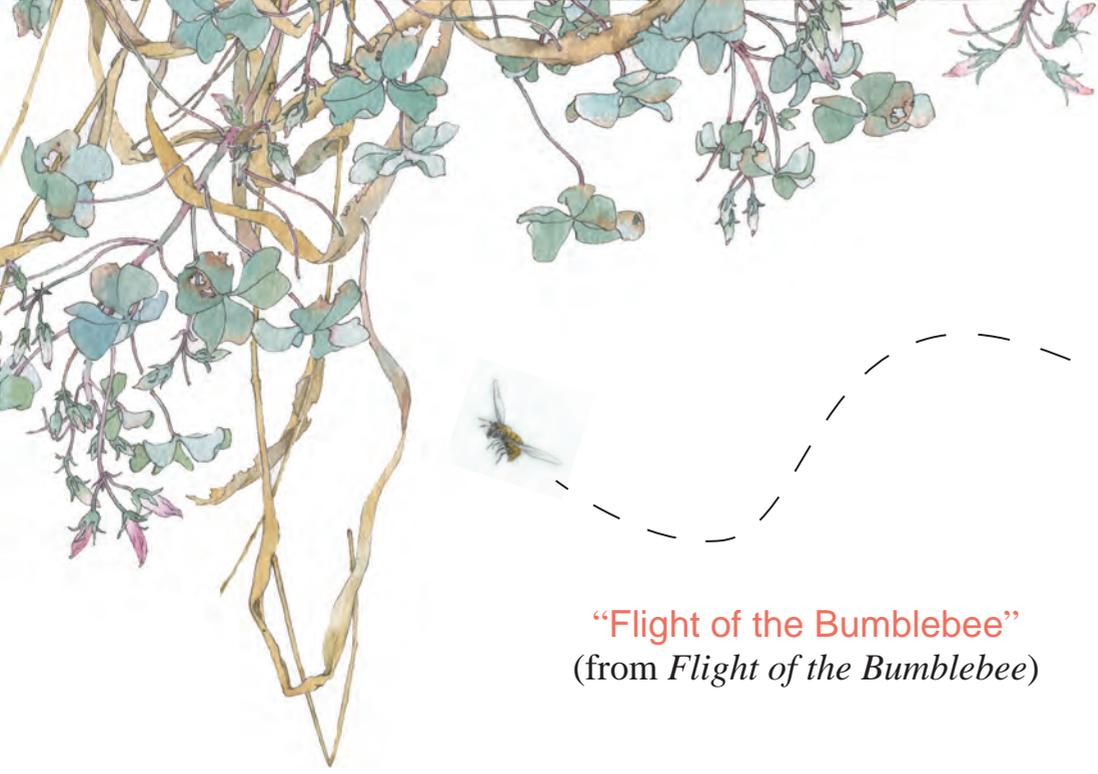


must respect Jin Ling's nature while planning for her future. This is not only the conflict and confusion faced by Jin Ling's mother. It is also commonly shared by her readers.

黃蓓佳

Selected chapters



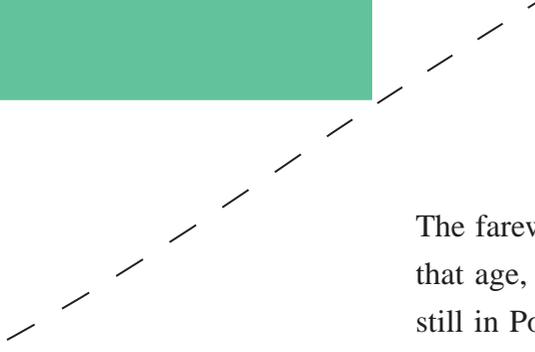


**“Flight of the Bumblebee”**  
(from *Flight of the Bumblebee*)

After graduating from primary school, I was admitted to Huadu Girl’s Middle School. Fan Shuwen and I parted ways; she went to a church school. She said that her mother, Fan Mali, had made the choice for her.

“Well, you know, I am a child of God.” And that’s how Fan Shuwen said goodbye to me, her voice full of the pain of parting.

She gave me a silk handkerchief embroidered with a bunch of pink roses as a present. I gave her a cloisonné brooch in return that I had bought at a second-hand shop on Shanxi Street. It wasn’t worth much. The price of rice was really high that year, and the value of paper notes was going down. Many people made their living by selling old things. Walking around the market, it was all mouldy calligraphy, paintings, antiques and leather goods as well as some beautiful jewelry, and everything was marked at worthlessly low prices.



The farewell between the two of us was actually a kind of ceremony. At that age, we especially liked those little rituals. Anyway, our home was still in Pomegranate Garden, and, during the holidays, we could still get together to play and gossip.

Actually, my school was only three miles away from the Pomegranate Garden. If I walked fast with my long legs, I could get there within twenty minutes. But dad still asked me to board. One reason was that Little Su was too old to sleep with my parents and had to move into the half room which my elder sister and I shared. Another reason was that my father felt I was too wild, like a boy, from my appearance to my behavior, so I had to be put into a girls' group to learn to be ladylike.

On the first day of school, I still wore an old unisex scout's uniform. Because the sweat made my hair smell in summer, my mother had cut it very short, and my ears were exposed on both sides. As I pushed through the dormitory door, the basin and other things in my hands banged together. A dozen girls or so in the room who were making their beds all covered their mouths with their hands and simultaneously screamed in horror. They'd mistaken me for a boy.

I was ashamed and upset, and I barely got through that first week. The first thing I did when I got home was blame my mother. Mother immediately comforted me and took me by the hand to go shopping. She bought a piece of cloth dyed with indanthrone blue, which that year was popular, and a stretch of light blue bamboo fabric. She stayed up all night to make two student gowns with slits down the waist for me.

The next morning, I happily put on a new gown, and the first thing I could think to do was rush to the bridge in Huaxi University campus and

look at my reflection in the river. Shimmering in the clear water was the silhouette of a girl with long legs and arms, a small head, a slim waist, disproportionately large hands, and short hair that the wind had turned as vertical as a cockscomb. For the first time in my life, I wasn't satisfied with my looks.

My elder sister was also unhappy with me, because the money my mother had spent on the two gowns was originally going to be for a new cotton-padded robe for my dad. She said, with some exaggeration, "Without a thick robe, Daddy's going to freeze in the countryside this winter."

I was deathly ashamed, and my whole body itched in the gown. But the gown had already been made and couldn't be refunded, so I had to tell myself secretly that I would study hard to compensate my father.

There were altogether four girl's dormitory rooms, each of which had seventeen or eighteen girls. The layout of each room was roughly the same: three rows of wooden beds, six in a row, with a walkway in the middle only wide enough for one person to pass by. At the foot of the bed, there was a simple shelf for hygiene utensils. There was room for a suitcase under the bed, and a rattan box for sundries. Each of the two walkways had an electric lamp, the lamp wire hanging down and a dirt-covered yellowish light bulb one the end, fifteen watts or maybe twenty-five. The light was dim, and sitting in bed reading for too long would make your eyes sore and well up with tears.

The four rooms formed a small courtyard, with one room each to the east, west, north, and south. Every day the girls went to the water room to bring water back to their dormitory, washed their faces, and bodies, then emptied the basin into the courtyard with a splash. The green brick



floor was wet and dirty all day, frozen over in winter and a paradise for mosquitoes and slugs in summer. The slugs were all over the yard; their greyish and yellowish, slow-moving bodies were covered in invisible streaks. Anyway, they were harmless to humans and animals, and we got used to them. I remember one time, one of the girls brought lunch back to the dormitory and left half of it in a bowl covered with a lid. Somehow a slimy slug made its way into the bowl, and she only found out after taking a few bites. She jumped to her feet and started crying. She threw the bowl on the ground, rushed into the courtyard and vomited wildly. From then on, as long as we left food in the dormitory room, we had to wrap it up tightly with newspaper, because once you saw those slugs crawling all over your food the joy of eating would evaporate instantly.

What scared me most was going to the toilet at night. The only toilet in the school was in the other corner of the playground: to get there from our dormitory, you had to pass through the wide but gloomy corridor around the courtyard. The two ghostly lights to the left and right of the corridor were always blowing about in the wind, and the colonnades, doors and windows where the lamp light shone through were always half lit and half in shadow, being the possible hiding places of monsters. Out of the gate of the dormitory was a playground with yellow sand, vertical bars and a balance beam. On windy days, the wind blew through the playground, with sand flying everywhere, the shadows of the poplar and willow branches surrounding the playground swaying like a group of evil spirits dancing. It was enough to make you dizzy. On windless, moonlit days, the flat ground was pale and cold and utterly silent, making you doubt whether what you were seeing was even real, and, if you stepped onto it, you'd end up falling down forever. So I normally refused to drink after four o'clock in the afternoon, and when I really needed to get up at night, I would wait till another girl in my room got up so we could go together.



One afternoon after school, about a month or so into the term, I hurried back to the dormitory to read a translated novel. This yellowed book had been circulating around our room, and it was finally my turn. Many of my classmates in the opposite dormitory were waiting for it.

The porter stood in the courtyard, straining her voice to call out to me:

“Huang Chengzi! Your brother’s come to see you!”

I closed the book and went out; it was Shen Tianlu.

“How could it be you?” It was strange to see him.

“Why couldn’t it be me?” he asked back.

I laughed, also feeling I had asked a question that made no sense.

I invited him to go to my room. He glanced into the room to make sure there were no other girls in there, and then stepped in cautiously.

He was so tall that the doorframe was almost touching his head.

After entering the room, he located my bed accurately and put a bundle on the pillow. He opened it; inside was a palm-sized sweet sponge cake, a few green tangerines, and a thin, cotton-padded jacket.

He picked up the sponge cake and handed it to me. “Take a bite. I only had ten cents, and could only buy this one.”

He seemed to be apologizing for not buying enough food for me, which

was quite touching.

I grabbed the sponge cake and gulped it down. Truth be told, ever since I started living on campus, the feeling of hunger had been overwhelming.

“Oh, Chengzi” he said pitifully. “Look at you. Haven’t you eaten for three hundred years?”

I had my mouth filled with food and didn’t care to speak.

He took up the cotton padded jacket with both his hands. “Look, my mum wanted me to bring it. She said that it was overcast and windy, there must be a cold current on its way. She was afraid you might catch a cold and get a sore throat, and so she had me bring this to you.”

It seemed he was the only one at home who my mother could order around. My elder brother was in his senior year of high school, and was a member of four or five associations in the school. He also often went to sit in on classes at the five universities, and was so busy you could hardly see him from morning to evening. My elder sister was said to be in love, as Fan Shuwen told me in confidence last week when I went home. Fan Shuwen said that she saw my sister learning to ride a bicycle in university playground, and a dozen boys were frantically following her, scrambling to help her hold the handlebars. Fan Shuwen said enviously, “Your sister is like a queen!”

Since my sister was like a queen, I doubted how long she would stay in the family. My brother too. My mother always said that raising a child who was too outstanding was like helping raise someone else’s kid; only the stupider, more down-to-earth ones were really your own. My mother

wasn't very cultured, but when it came to the ways of the world, she was an expert.

I gulped down the sponge cake in three mouthfuls and began to peel a green tangerine. When I ripped off a small piece of its thin skin, the juice burst out, and the dormitory was immediately suffused with the fragrant sweet and sour smell. It was heavenly.

Shen Tianlu looked at me with a faint smile. "You girls!" he said, as if suggesting all girls were food lovers.

I didn't talk back, for the sake of the food he'd brought me.

He noticed that all my attention was on those tangerines, so he looked around out of boredom. He immediately caught sight of the book I had just finished reading on the shelf. "*Mother?* By the Russian Gorky?"

Back then, I wasn't keen on schoolwork, but was excited at the mere mention of literature. I took a towel and rubbed the sticky tangerine juice off my fingers, then carefully presented it to him like a prized possession. I asked him if he had read it. He said he hadn't, but he had heard of it. Many students at his school were passing around the works of Russian writers, some of them poetry collections. He'd taken a look at a few pages, but couldn't quite understand them, since reading those poems was like going down the stairs, with two or three words to one line, then down to another few words on the next line, and he found it strange.

"Those are Mayakovsky's poems!" I shouted, "You fool!"

He grinned, accepting my accusation. To some extent, facing an easily

agitated person like me, he was already showing signs of maturity, quietly sitting on the bed opposite to mine, hands propped up on the bedframe, and buttocks only perched on the edge, probably afraid of crumpling someone else's sheets. He spoke to me softly; aside from the joy in his face I could see a little love and perhaps indulgence, all behind a seemingly solemn and rational expression.

It was only a month into the school term and I hadn't found a close friend to whisper secrets to like I did with Fan Shuwen. But I was a chatterbox, had ants in my pants, was unable to keep quiet at the best times, and had a stomachful of strange people and weird things to talk about. So when I got to see Shen Tianlu, I poured everything out, like beans from a bamboo pipe. School lessons, the weird Dean of Studies with that tousled perm, how terrible the food was... I even told him my embarrassing situation of being afraid to get up at night.

"Well, your school doesn't sound that bad," he nodded, "Except for the toilet part."

I jumped up and said, "How can you say it is 'not so bad'? Fan Shuwen's school is ten times better than ours! They have steak for lunch! And they can take hot baths every week!"

"But you're not a Christian," he said slowly.

"Of course I'm not a Christian."

"And you're not a foreigner with blond hair and blue eyes."

"Of course not."

“So, they eat steak and have hot baths at school, but it’s got nothing to do with you.”

I felt my anger dissolve and slumped into a bad mood. It seemed nothing I said would come out right. I urged him to leave, because my classmates would be back later and it wasn’t proper for a boy to be in their dorm. He said he couldn’t go yet since my father had ordered him to check my homework, especially Maths.

“Uncle says that Mathematics is the one subject you can’t afford to get behind in. If you fall behind at the beginning of school, you’ll never catch up. That’s what happened to me.”

What a nuisance! The both of them, Daddy and Shen Tianlu! They seemed to already know that I only got seventy marks in the monthly Maths test I’d taken the day before and were all set on seeing me make a fool of myself.

But I wouldn’t let him look at my homework. I made an excuse and said that the monthly exam would be next week, and I found what I learnt this month was rather simple, there was nothing difficult about it, and that I would ask him for help if I needed it.

“Would you like me to show you our piano room? So you can tell them about it when you go home?”

He glanced up and thought about it for a moment, “OK then.”



Naturally, I dared to take him to the piano room because I was confident in piano. In Huaxiba, Huadu Girl's Middle School had always been famous for its special music education. When girls got into the school, they had to master at least one skill among the various musical instruments, including singing. Although I wasn't interested in music, I had been playing piano with Fan Mali since I was a child, so I knew my way round a piano a little bit and had an advantage over my peers at the beginning. That's why I liked other people to see my piano lessons.

We walked out side by side, through the moon-shaped gate of the small courtyard. He looked so tall, and his stride was so long that it seemed as if he had two springs under his feet: each step was like a leap. I trotted up, naturally trying to take him by the arm. Startled and blushed, he looked left and right nervously, brushed my hand off, and whispered, "Hey, Chengzi, you're already a middle school student."

So what? Aren't you still my brother Tianlu, no matter how old we get? That's what I was thinking, but I didn't say it. Ah, why do people get so stiff and prudish when they grow up?

I soon discovered that all the senior girls we met on the way were looking at him secretly. Well, I was careless and heartless, all right, but I could still guess the emotions of other girls. I noted that the girls who were walking along perfectly normally would act strangely when they looked up and saw the tall and imposing figure of Shen Tianlu. Then they would halt involuntarily and blush with a panicked look on their faces, two or three of them turning back to whisper to each other with the end of their braids in their mouths and their shoulders wiggling back and forth, casting the odd furtive glance back at him.

Aha! It dawned on me that my brother Tianlu was a handsome young man who caused many girls' hearts to flutter. The thought made me very proud and I walked along with my head up so high my eyes were almost looking up to the sky.

This was actually bad news for Tianlu. He was an honest, shy boy, and being the object of all those girls' attention suddenly made him so nervous that he followed me with his eyes low, stumbling along as if he'd forgotten how to walk. I couldn't help it but double over and let out a big laugh. Shen Tianlu was so embarrassed by my laughter that he whispered, gnashing his teeth, "You mad girl!"

He must have regretted agreeing to go to the piano room with me. A boy barging into an all girl's school must feel like a young deer entering a tiger's den. Anyway, he never came to see me at school after that. When my mother absolutely had to send for me, it was always Little Su who came in. The most Shen Tianlu did was to escort her to my school gate.

The journey from our dormitory to the piano room seemed especially long that day. After walking through the playground, we passed two rows of classrooms with carved eaves running down the corridor, then across a secluded courtyard covered with wisteria, and walked a dozen paces while holding our breath past the window of the teacher's office before we saw the door of the piano room, decorated with musical notes.

The door was unlocked; students could enter anytime. Practicing the piano was encouraged in our school. I took him into the room with some familiarity, opened the lid, played a middle C, turned to him, and asked, "What do you want to listen to?"

Being inside the girls' piano room made him a bit embarrassed, "Um, what about something your teacher taught you?"

I was keen to show off my skills: "What a boring suggestion. Our teacher has only started on basic finger skills, since school has just begun."

"Um, I really don't know. Whatever you want to play is fine."

"No, you must name something," I wouldn't let him be.

After struggling for quite a while, he finally had an idea: "Yesterday I heard Fan Shuwen playing the piano at home. It was beautiful, but also strange, like a swarm of insects buzzing around. I was listening so intently I could hardly breathe..."

I cried out, "That one I know, it's *Flight of the Bumblebee!*"

"Huh?"

I played a few notes on the piano with one hand, "This one?"

He got excited, "Yes, yes! It sounds nice, right? Wouldn't you say so?"

I got up and found this piece by the Russian composer Korsakov in the sheet music cabinet. It was an orchestral song from the opera *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, which tells the story of a prince who escapes to a small island after being wounded by an evil man. Later he turns into a small bumblebee and attacks his enemy in front of the tsar with a wild dance. Fan Mali used to tell me about this particular piece and had me and Fan Shuwen practice it. According to her, it wasn't that hard to play, the only

difficulty being the tempo: if you couldn't play it fast enough, it wouldn't sound like a bumblebee flying, but rather a clumsy green fly.

Well, since I had just boasted right to his face, I had to find a way to make this bumblebee fly, or else I'd be making a fool out of myself.

But my skill at playing the piano was not comparable to Fan Shuwen's. Right at the beginning of the piece, I struggled to play a fast descending scale, so decided to stop before I could embarrass myself further. There was no way I could do it; my fingers couldn't run that fast over the keys, let alone about the dance of a wild bumblebee, I couldn't even make the green fly lift its clumsy head.

I sat there in silence, feeling so sad I wanted to cry.

"Come on now," Shen Tianlu reached out his hand and gently closed the piano lid for me. "Fan Shuwen started learning from four years old, but you only started at eight. It's natural you can't do as well."

I confessed to him, "I've never liked playing the piano."

"We can't like everything."

"But I still want to learn it."

"Then do it. You'll get better with practice."

"Yeah."

I asked him again, "Do you think less of me?"

He thought for a moment and said, “I’ll go back and tell Uncle that you are working hard at school.”

“Really?”

“It’s not a lie. You really are working hard.”

I stared at him, not knowing whether he really thought so, or if he was deliberately making fun of me.

“It’s true. The first step is realizing you aren’t good enough.”

I relaxed and smiled at him.

He held out his hand and ran his fingers through my hair. “Don’t be upset, little bumblebee. One day you’ll be flying down this row of keys.”

I said sure, of course I would.

And I really meant it.

Then I walked him out until the school gate. After taking a few steps, he looked back at me. I could see in his eyes what he wanted to say. He believed I could do it, all of it. “One day...” That’s what he wanted to say.



Selected Illustrations from Huang Beijia's Books



“Sesame Candy”  
(from *Through the Eyes of a Child*)

On the twenty-sixth day of the twelfth lunar month, Ximei, arranged herself neatly, put on her mother’s blue apron over her flower-patterned coat, wrapped her hair in a scarf, and trimmed her hails. With a sweet smile, she arrived at Duo’er’s house to cook.

Wanwan had wanted to go out after breakfast. He had a bag of inflated balloons; the kid had become a little emperor. The children at Renzi Lane, whether elder or younger, boys or girls, all followed him closely with their eyes fixated on the scarce goods in his hands. Wanwan was very gullible and easy to convince. If someone were to stick a spring onion in his nose, Wanwan would think himself to be an elephant. His bag of goodies was generously shared, one for you, one for him... Before the New Year had arrived, more than half had been given out. Luckily for him, he had a very sharp sense for food. When he heard that Ximei was coming to make sesame candy, the foot he had already placed over the threshold quickly sprang back, announcing, “I have a cold today, can’t go out.”

Everybody in the family could see his intentions and laughed. Wanwan blushed and repeated, “I really have a cold. I have a runny nose.”

His father teased, “People who have the flu must not touch sesame. Sesame will make the tongue numb.”

Wanwan blinked his eyes, trying to find out whether they were pulling his leg. After a moment he cunningly argued back, “Sesame candy is candy, not sesame.”

His mother hit his father’s arm. “Enough, stop annoying him.”

Wanwan groaned, “I just want to see how sesame candy is made.”

By this time, Ximei was already in the kitchen, checking all the ingredients. After counting them, she told Duo’er’s mother, “Auntie, you have too much. If we do one pot, it will get burnt easily. Let’s make two.”

Duo’er’s mother smiled, “As you say.”

Ximei read out the amount of ingredients for each pot: one *jin* (500g) of sesame seeds, two *liang* (100g) of peanuts, one *jin* (500g) of brown sugar, three *jin* (150g) of maltose, and one *liang* (50g) of peanut oil. After she had read them out, she magically pulled out of her apron pocket a small scale, as short as Wanwan’s arm. Pursing her lips, she began to weigh the ingredients on the table to get the correct amount. She then asked Duo’er’s mother to put away all the excess items to avoid confusion.

After this, she inserted a movable baffle plate at the bottom of the coal ball stove to better control the fire. An iron wok sat on the stove to first

roast the peanuts and sesame seeds. The moment she placed the wok on the stove, she turned around, moving like the wind as she washed a soup bowl the size of a basin, a chopping board made from ginkgo wood, and a knife for vegetables. She dried them with a piece of clean dishcloth. Speedily, she brushed a thin layer of oil in the soup bowl and on the cleaver and left them aside to be used later.

At that moment, the wok had become hot, with a few thin lines of smoke rising from it. Ximei roasted the peanuts first, cooking all the four *liang* of them at one go. When the peanuts were poured into the wok, she used the tip of her foot to half shut the air inlet at the bottom of the stove. The peanuts had to be continually stirred in the pot. The peanuts began to release steam. After the steam had vanished, they started emitting aromatic smell. Soon the pink nuts gradually turned dark red. When smoke began to rise from the wok, the sharp-eyed Ximei quickly



picked up a peanut with her agile fingers. She kept turning the scorching nut in her fingers, blowing on it to cool it down. Then she broke it open to check its color. While doing this, her right hand was still constantly turning the spatula to prevent the rest of the peanuts from burning.

When the peanuts were done, Ximei poured them onto a plate, spread them out, and placed them outside the kitchen to cool. All the roasted seeds and nuts had to be cooled before they could be crunchy.

The next thing to roast were the sesame seeds. Sesame seeds burnt easily, so Ximei closed the shutter of the air inlet by more than half. To make sure the heat would be more even, Ximei divided the two *jin* of sesame seeds to be roasted in two woks.

By the time the sesame seeds were roasted, the peanuts had cooled. Ximei turned off the stove and brought the peanuts back to the kitchen to remove the hull. After it had been removed and blown off, the peanuts were placed on the chopping board, where Ximei crushed them into smaller pieces with the spatula. She then poured the peanuts, crushed at about the size of soybeans, back onto the plate.

The whole process was orderly and smooth, without a second wasted. Duo'er, watching by the side, was completely absorbed. No wonder the adults in the alley spoke highly of Ximei's skills. She was awesome!

Duo'er's parents, old Auntie Hao, and Wanwan stood in a row outside the kitchen door, watching Ximei's impressive culinary performance. Respect and amazement were written all over their face.

Ximei washed the wok, brushed it with a layer of oil, and returned it to

the stove. The air inlet was opened to first heat up the cold wok, then half closed to lower the heat. Half a bowl of water was poured into the wok, sizzling—it was about to boil. Adding one *jin* of brown sugar to the wok, Ximei lowered the heat even more, stirring unceasingly. The sugar began to melt, puffing, with bubbles bobbing, slowly swelling and rising, as if trying to leap out of the wok. A sweet smell wafted through the kitchen. The bubbles became fewer and smaller as the melted sugar got thicker and heavier, eventually turning into red caramel. Without turning her head, Ximei correctly picked up the maltose that she had placed on the chopping board behind her. She continued stirring the caramel while she gradually added in the maltose. When it was well mixed, she cooked it for a little longer, spooned a bit with the spatula, and lifted it high. As she raised the spatula in the air, she pulled a thin yellowish thread of caramel. Hastily, Ximei shut the air inlet shutter extending the tip of her foot. One hand continued working with the spatula while the other successively added to the wok the peanut oil, the peanuts, and the sesame that were on the chopping board. In a matter of seconds, the ingredients were mixed. For Ximei, stirring was very strenuous; her wrists became heavy, and pearls of sweat started appearing on her forehead.

When she could not stir it anymore, she began to make use of the strength of her whole arm to help. She held the spatula down to press the mixture. It was so hot that she sighed. But her hands kept moving quickly, not overdoing it, but neither pausing, moving up and down like a swallow flying around the wok.

Finally, she moved that large bowl of golden, fragrant sesame and peanut candy into the coarse pottery bowl she had prepared earlier. While it was still hot, she spread it out and compacted it on every side of the bowl with the spatula. She removed the wok from the stove, which she had turned

off for the moment. Lifting her apron to wipe sweat from her face, Ximei smiled at Duo'er's family and said, "The first pot is done."

Wanwan sniffed with his little nose, trying to butter up Ximei, "It smells so good."

Ximei laughed, "It's still hot; you have to wait."

Almost unable to control himself, Wanwan eyed the bowl of sesame candy eagerly. He gulped and swallowed his saliva.

Duo'er's mother worried about Ximei, so she asked her to rest a bit before cooking the second pot. But Ximei said that it was better to work while the wok was still hot and the heat on the stove just right, finishing everything at one go.

While working on the second batch, Ximei did something different. She added sweet-scented osmanthus sauce and chopped up tangerine skin that she had brought. This way, when the candy was done, the aroma of the osmanthus and the tangerine had blended with the flavor of the sesame and peanuts. It was irresistible and seemed to have a distinctive touch. This impressed Duo'er's father, who kept praising Ximei, "Very, very good! That was a great idea!"

Always hardworking, Ximei did not stop after everything was done. Instead, she rushed to help washing the wok. After it was clean, she filled the kettle with cold water and put it on the stove. Then she tidied up the bowls on the chopping board, washed and wiped everything. Duo'er's mother and old Auntie Hao tried to stop her, but their effort was in vain. When all was back to normal, the first batch of sesame candy had cooled



down. She pulled the chopping board to her, lifted the bowl of candy and turned it over. A huge block of candy fell down with a clap. Holding the knife, Ximei lifted her arm and began cutting: first horizontally, then vertically. Finally, she cracked the candy piece by piece. In three to five minutes, on the chopping board was a big pile of candy pieces, each one as long, wide, and thick as Duo'er's thumb. They looked as neat as if they had been measured. Taking up a piece of candy, one could distinguish clearly the brownish red caramel from the white sesame and peanuts: it looked thoroughly refreshing. Placing it between one's teeth, a light bite would bring out a crunch and the fragrance. The sweetness was just perfect.

Old Auntie Hao complimented her, "Girl, you have great skill!"

Ximei instructed, "Leave it to cool for another hour and then put it in a rice jar. That will keep it from getting damp."

The scraps left on the chopping board and the unwanted edges were put into a bowl and given to Wanwan. Wanwan did not mind as long as he got to eat them. Old Auntie Hao said it looked like Wanwan would not need any dinner that day.

Duo'er's mother tried to make Ximei accept her due payment, but Ximei only agreed to take two pieces of sesame candy and two yuan for her labor. Her face turned red as she said, "You gave me too much. If you sell these in the shop, you can only get seventy or eighty cents each jin."

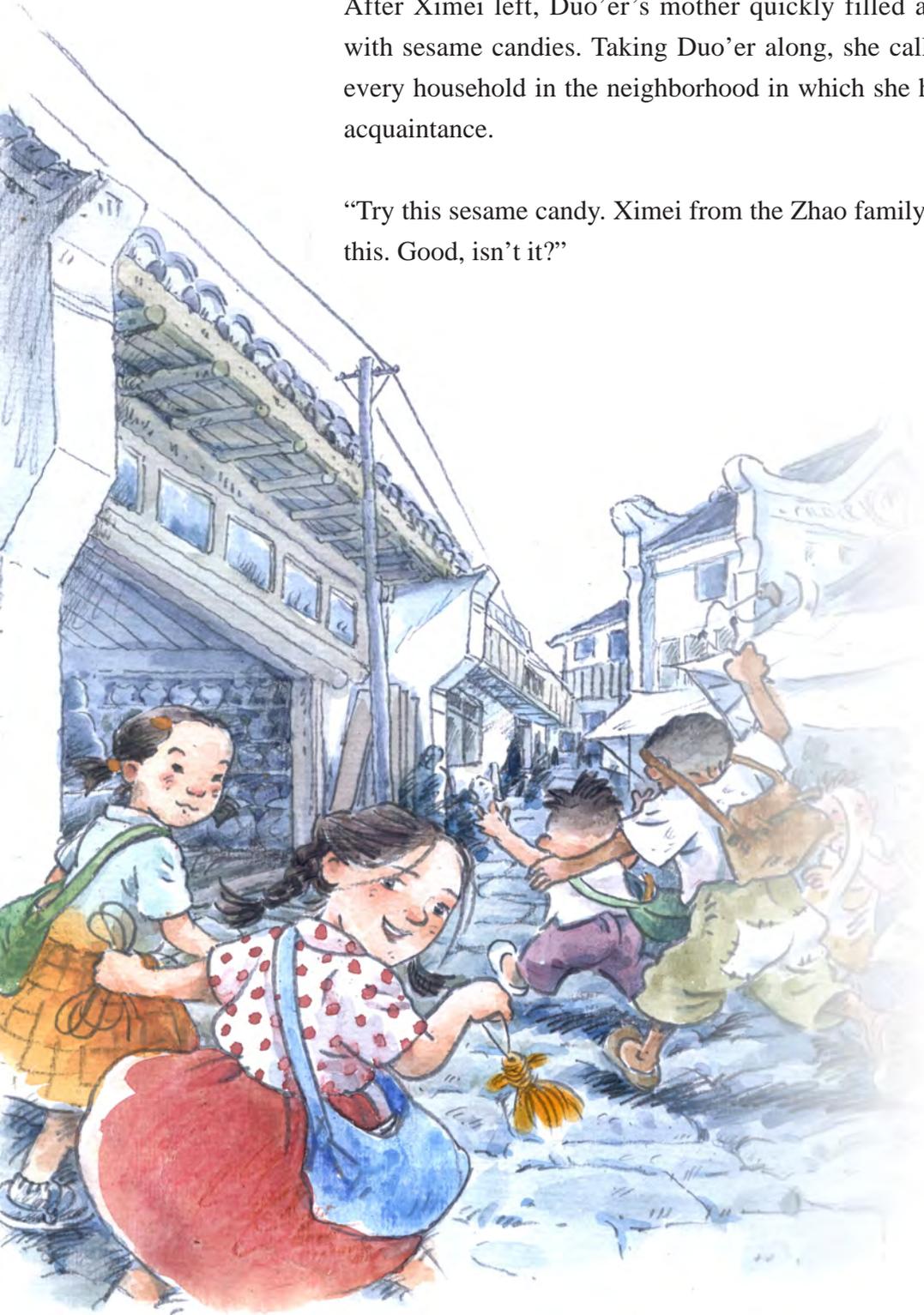
Old Auntie Hao chuckled, "The sesame candy from the shop has dry sesame seeds and old peanuts: it either is not sweet enough or sticks to your teeth. Nobody makes better sesame candy than you."



Ximei covered her face in embarrassment, “ Old Auntie Hao, if you carry on, you will make my toes curl. I am going to be really embarrassed.”

After Ximei left, Duo'er's mother quickly filled a plate with sesame candies. Taking Duo'er along, she called on every household in the neighborhood in which she had an acquaintance.

“Try this sesame candy. Ximei from the Zhao family made this. Good, isn't it?”



“Come try one piece. You can’t get such yummy sesame candy anywhere else. It’s crunchy and crispy, easy for old people to chew.”

She publicized and promoted along the way, explaining the cost of a pot of sesame candies, hinting that in order to receive you have to give first.

The cold wind hardened the sesame candies. Mother had forgotten to put on her gloves when she came out. Her hands were so cold they could not grip firmly, so she hugged the blue and white porcelain plate between her arm and chest, as if cuddling a baby.

Duo’er found it interesting. Her mother was definitely different from other mothers. Sometimes her mother was like a little kid, innocent and full of enthusiasm, and she liked to educate everybody, as if they were her students.

It was only a few days before New Year. Every household was busy steaming buns and cooking dishes. The savory aroma of different food filled the narrow Renzi Lane. Sometimes, these smells went well together, tempestuous as if they were rushing together to a great height. Sometimes, the different smells were not compatible with one another, each clashing and fighting to subdue the other. Duo’er devised a little game as she walked leisurely by her mother’s side. Just before they reached each household, she would stop, breathe deeply, and try to guess what dishes that particular family was cooking from the aroma coming from inside the courtyard walls. Stewed pork balls? Sweet and sour ribs? Fish braised in soy sauce? Pig’s head or stewed intestines?

Most times, she was right. Children during her time were exceptionally sensitive to food and smell.

Duo'er's mother's publicity strategy was very effective. The next day, about three or four families in that alley approached Ximei to ask her to make sesame candy. As New Year's Day was just around the corner and every family had children, they could not go without sesame, peanut, and rice candy. Both buying them and making them at home was expensive. Then, what would be better and more economical than homemade candy? Besides, cooking the candy at home would also bring a household the reputation of being eager to help.

Making sesame candy became a trend that spread like a contagious disease. It started with one household, but soon more and more households joined in. When the ladies of each house met one another in the morning as they came out of their homes, they asked, "Has your family made any?" "Made what?" "Sesame candy, of course. Ximei, from the Zhao family..."

One asked another what she was waiting for, and told her to rush to prepare the ingredients and invite Ximei. Otherwise, she would fall behind and her children might be left without any candy.

At once, Ximei became very busy. Every family called her. Her fame had spread like wildfire, far and wide in Renzi Lane and Nanmen Street. Ximei had more work than she could deal with; she had become a real master of sesame candy. Sometimes, when Duo'er went out, she could see Ximei, wearing her blue apron and a grey head scarf, her hair shimmering with translucent maltose, rushing from one house to another. Her slender, skillful hands had become thick and swollen over the past few days working in the heat and water. They reminded Duo'er of her mother's hands when she had woven with a shuttle in the past. Bumping into her old friend, Ximei could only smile apologetically and say

hurriedly, “Catch up with you later.”

Later? When? Duo'er did not dare raise any hope. When people grew up, their responsibilities were different. The good old times of telling stories, crocheting clothes, weaving wheat straw, and adding color to black and white drawings together might never come back. This, Duo'er was aware of.

Fortunately, Ximei's elder sister came home in time; one of the sisters took care of the household while the other worked outside. Otherwise, they could not have taken care of the invalid at home.

During the few days before New Year, Ximei had earned about twenty to thirty yuan, which was a month's salary for a young worker. On New Year's Eve, she worked until nearly midnight. Duo'er heard that Ximei was so tired she could not even lift her legs over the threshold when she got home. After a good sleep, Ximei went to Duo'er's house the next morning, the first day of the New Year, to make a visit on the family. When she saw Duo'er's mother, she was overcome with gratitude. She called, “Auntie,” and tears began to roll down her cheeks. Alarmed, Duo'er's mother uttered, “It's New Year, it's New Year!”

Yes, Ximei had had this opportunity only because it was New Year, but what would happen after this period? Where could Ximei's family of three find money for food and medical expenses?

Duo'er's mother had not thought so far. In fact, this was not something that should concern her. After the New Year period, around the tenth day, Duo'er's parents left Renzi Lane to return to school, taking with them a big jar of sesame candies to give out as gifts.

After the excitement of New Year, the life in Renzi Lane turned back to normal. The adults went back to work and the kids returned to school, while the elderly people went back to their household chores—buying groceries, making the laundry, cleaning, cooking... Every family had its own problems, and nobody would keep talking about another family all the time.



**“My Dear Radio Host”**  
(from *A Kiss for Mom*)

For a long time, Didi could not figure out what Shu Yimei did for work. In his little world, she was a mysterious person who, like a character in a computer game, appeared and disappeared without trace, leaving infinite blanks in a limited space.

At half-past six in the morning, the alarm clock emitted a weird electronic sound, “Wake up! Get up! Get up quickly! Get up quickly!” Didi was startled. Not having enough time to rub his eyes, he sat for another minute to wake himself up a bit. Hastily, he pulled his clothes on and put on his socks and shoes. On cloudy days, the room would be dark before the curtains were opened, so he had to turn on the light so that his arms wouldn’t reach into the same sleeve, his legs wouldn’t go into the same

leg of his trousers, his socks wouldn't be worn inside out, or his shoes wouldn't be on the wrong foot.

Fully dressed, he went into the bathroom to wash his face and brush his teeth. He always arranged himself following the same order: he would brush three times on the left and three times on the right, then wash his face with three clockwise circular movements. In the past, Daddy often teased him, "Hey, look, a cat washing its face!" Now, Shu Yimei did not watch Didi wash his face. Didi could not imagine what she would say if she did.

The next thing to do was to wet and straighten the hair that was sticking out on the back of his head. Shu Yimei didn't tell Didi to do this, but he did it for himself. The hair on the back of his head stuck out like a cockscomb. If he did not tend to it, kids in the class would mock it, especially Chen Xiu'er, the class commissary for studies, who was seated just behind Didi. Being a newcomer, Didi could easily be laughed at, so he took great care in presenting a good image.

The last step was to tie his red scarf in front of the mirror. Draping the left side of the scarf across the right to make a loop, Didi then thrust it through the center, pulled it out, pushed it through the loop, and tightened the knot with a gentle pull. Simple steps like these were easier said than done, especially in front of a mirror. Draping in the wrong direction could result in no loop. In the past, Dad was the one who did this for Didi. Dad stooped, shoulders leveled, eyes looking at his fingers; after two or three



twists, the red scarf was knotted neatly around Didi's neck. Then Dad would grab his shoulders, giving them a pat to indicate that everything was ready and he could go to school.

Shu Yimei had never done this for Didi. She only requested him, "Do not make yourself look like a vagabond!"

Actually, Didi did not know what a vagabond looked like. From his own understanding, he guessed Shu Yimei meant he had to keep himself neat and clean. Therefore, during his ten-minute morning ritual, he would try his best to make himself clean. Although Shu Yimei had never once opened the bathroom door to check on his personal hygiene, Didi always believed she knew everything. Her invisible eyes could be felt in the whole house.

Finally, Didi tiptoed across the living room to the kitchen for his breakfast. Shu Yimei had already prepared it the night before. It consisted of a pack of milk, a banana, and two slices of bread with jam. On Tuesdays, bread would be replaced by either Italian cake or a Swiss roll, while on Thursdays it would either be steamed buns or pastry. If the replacement was buns, Shu Yimei would leave a note saying, "Microwave for one minute." If it was pastry, it was more complicated. Shu Yimei would leave more instructions: "Turn the function knob to 'bake' and set the time to four minutes."

Everything was impeccable, as accurate and delicate as a Swiss clock.



Once, overcome by his curiosity, Didi set half a minute more when microwaving the buns. As a result, they were all wrinkled and tough like a bunch of ox tendons. Another time, when he heated the pastry, he decided to cut down one minute. To his dismay, the part of the pastry that faced the heat was slightly warm, while the side that did not face the heat was still cold and the oil on its surface still frozen hard.

Didi finally understood that time was a standard determined by Shu Yimei. Other people couldn't alter it easily, neither could they break it nor dissect it.

During this tense and hurried lapse of time, Shu Yimei was always absent.

She slept.

After working at night, she got home in the early morning and went straight to bed. On weekends, when Didi was home, she would get up earlier, at about ten or eleven. The rest of the days she would only leave her bedroom after lunch.

The rest of the days she would only leave her bedroom after lunch. If she got up earlier one day, her head would ache. With a pale face and an absent gaze, yawning continuously, she looked like one of those drug addicts on TV. Besides, she complained she did not have energy, which would affect her work at night.

Shu Yimei attached great importance to her work. She had to keep her spirits up to fight the battle.

Didi finished his breakfast silently and threw the empty milk carton into the trash bin. He swept the bread crumbs on the table into a tiny pile with a dishcloth and swept it into the sink. Again, Didi tiptoed, this time back to his room. He picked up his schoolbag, opened the door, got out in a flash, and locked the door. Only then did he sling his bag over his shoulders. Since his bag was heavy, the movement when he slung it over his shoulders would cause the objects in his pencil case to rattle. He couldn't put it over his shoulders until he was outside so as not to wake his mother.

He left the house and went to school alone, leaving the whole morning and silence to Shu Yimei. He imagined how she looked in her sleep: her face as quiet as an angel's, her cheeks showing a rosy tone, her lips moving slightly, her breath like a long thread, and the fragrance of orange flowers like mist lingering in the room.

He felt somewhat happy, a little regretful, and a little listless. What kind of a person was his mother? Why was she not like the mothers of most of the kids in his class? Why didn't she work at regular hours, working at daytime and resting at night like them?

In the evening, like a bird kept in the cage for too long, Didi raced home, running down the street lined with phoenix trees. He did not know why he couldn't wait to get home. Running was a totally subconscious act, prompted by a desire to escape his new school and classmates, as well as by a dinge of fear.

He ran up the stairs, two steps at a time. Panting and sweating, Didi rang the doorbell and waited. The green burglar-proof door opened. Shu Yimei



appeared and nodded her head, telling him to enter. When Didi got in and changed his shoes, she had already left, either to the kitchen to cook or to the bedroom to search for things.

Didi did not mind her aloofness. As soon as he got home, he felt more at ease. He could do his homework or play computer games; he was calmer and less agitated.

In reality, home had for a long time felt as strange as his new school. Shu Yimei hardly spoke with him. For the half month since Didi had arrived in Nanjing, Mom had spoken less than thirty sentences with him. On average, she uttered less than two sentences a day.

She might ask him, “Have you had enough to eat?” or “Do you feel warm wearing this?”

Another time she might say, “If you have time, you must



practice writing with your fountain pen.”

Others, her words were “It’s bedtime.”

Just these sentences. Simple, concise, and neutral.

Most of the time, Shu Yimei seemed to be in a trance, her eyes wandering, as if she was pondering things that never seemed to end and chores that she couldn’t cope with. She would pace up and down between the living room and her bedroom in a pair of soft-soled slippers with a Hello Kitty print, white pajamas with a motif of red roses, and hair casually pinned up with an octopus-shaped hair clip, leaving stray strands hanging loosely from her ears, looking as silent as her eyebrows. Sometimes she could become so engrossed in her thoughts that she would bump lightly into the door frame and the force would bounce her gently back half a step. Startled, she would stand looking at the door with astonishment, feeling a sense of anger and helplessness. If it happened that she had something to speak about with Didi, she would begin with a “Hmm,” as if trying to decide whether what she wanted to say was necessary.

Shu Yimei was not good at household chores, so dinner was usually simple. Her specialty was soup, but this was limited to either pork-rib soup or pork-hock soup. After the two soups alternated for a while, he bore the strong, greasy smell of the meat, but not long after that Didi considered eating soup a torture. At first, he was able to finish a big bowl, but then he grudgingly agreed to have a small one. Finally, whenever he smelled of soup, he would lose his appetite. Didi protested cautiously, and Shu Yimei agreed not to cook pork soup anymore. Instead, she would cook tomato soup, soybean soup with green vegetables, or pickled mustard tuber soup with eggs. Shu Yimei would take off her apron and

bring to the table a bowl of soup filled to the brim, never forgetting to frown and grumble, “You give me so much trouble.”

You give me so much trouble. To Didi’s ears, although this sentence had a little reproach in it, it also held happiness. Didi was happy that his being a picky eater had enriched his mom’s culinary skills. Didi did not know whether Shu Yimei thought the same, but he was willing to believe so. If she did, it just showed that she really loved him and would be willing to take trouble for him.

After dinner, Didi always went to his room to do his homework. Shu Yimei would stay in the living room alone to watch TV programs like “News Live,” “Social Affairs,” “Focus Interview,” or “Wide Angle Documentary.” Shu Yimei was very strange: the programs that other women liked watching—like entertainment programs, TV-shopping shows, or series—did not seem to attract her. When any of those programs came on, she would reach out for the remote control and switch channels to some serious social news program.

At about nine o’clock, she would switch off the TV and knock on Didi’s bedroom door to remind him that it was bedtime. By the time Didi got to the bathroom to clean up, his mom had changed her clothes and shoes, taken her handbag, and left for work.

It was the same every day. On the days that she fell sick with a stuffy nose and a hoarse voice, she would call to ask for leave. The strange thing was that she would still go to work with a headache, but not when she had a stuffy nose and a hoarse voice.

Couldn’t his mom be an editor at a publishing house? Didi thought. But

he soon rejected this conjecture. Why would an editor start to work at nine at night?

Didi pricked up his ears to listen for Shu Yimei's footsteps going down. When he thought she had reached the ground floor, he ran to the window, crouched on the windowsill, and stretched his neck to see her cross the door, get onto a bicycle, and disappear into the distance.

He had been waiting for the day that she would turn back, look up at him and give him a smile. If she did so, Didi's heart would feel as sweet as melted sugar lumps. But Shu Yimei always cycled off and never looked back.

One day, he asked Grandma, "What is Mom's job?"

Lowering her head to take a bottle of soy sauce from the cabinet, she casually replied, "She's a radio host."

Did was shocked, his heart thumping rapidly. A radio host? Wow! A radio host was such a terrific profession. His mother was actually a radio host!

He narrowed his eyes until they were nearly shut, laughed, and stuffed his sleeve into his mouth. It seemed that, if he did not do this, his laughter would fly out of his mouth and get out of control.

Grandma was frying chili in the kitchen, preparing it for cooking fried soybeans with dried rice tofu. Every now and then, she came to Shu Yimei's home to help cooking a few dishes, or checking if the quilt covers needed to be changed, or seeing if they had run out of toothpaste and washing powder.

Grandma turned her head and saw Didi's surprise and excitement. Suddenly flustered, she told him repeatedly, "You must not tell anyone! Remember, don't tell anyone!"

Why wasn't he allowed to tell? Didi wondered. Was Grandma trying to be humble? Was it because her daughter was so outstanding that she felt she should not show off?

"Grandma," said Didi enduring the smell of chili, walking to her side and announcing: "I am very happy today." Then he added, "I never imagined that Mom would be a radio host."

Grandma seemed upset, different from her usual self. Both her hands clasped her apron to wipe her mouth, as if attempting to wipe away what she had just said.

"Don't ever tell anyone," she almost begged.

"But why? Isn't radio host a very good job?"

"It's better not to tell anyone," Grandma's tone was very firm and didn't seem open for discussion.

Thinking for a little while, Didi said, "Oh, I get it! We mustn't let other people get too jealous."

**“A Brief and Necessary Introduction to the Protagonist”**  
(from *I Will Be a Good Child*)

Jin Ling, a girl who had just turned eleven, was a sixth grader at Xinhua Street Elementary School. Measuring one meter, she weighed fifty-five kilos, the perfect weight for a heavy weight contestant. Being chubby, her face, nose, and mouth were all round, which naturally attracted people to her, and these people couldn't help but to pinch her face. Jin Ling's face had been pinched over a thousand times since she was little. In her own words, she almost had a callus because of so much pinching.

Jin Ling had a natural ability to connect with people. Whether the stranger was a man or a woman, old or young, rich or poor, Jin Ling could easily find a common topic to start a conversation, occasionally making the other party laugh. Going home from school, she would have to pass by four small grocery stores, three snack stands, a hairdressing salon, a bicycle repair stand, and a newly opened gift shop. The owners and staff in these stores had become Jin Ling's buddies despite the age difference.

After school, as Jin Ling strolled home with her school bag over her shoulders, she stuck her head into the shops to scrutinize the shelves for any exciting items, such as plastic dinosaurs in packs of crisp corn, hollow plastic chords for weaving scooby-doo bracelets, or action figures

from the most popular animated movies. No matter how carelessly the shopkeeper placed these items in any inconspicuous corner, Jin Ling could always spot them at a glance. She would sometimes delve into her pocket for the money to buy one, and other times she might ask to feel it, then return it to its shelf.

She went to the snack stand to look for her old friend—a dirty tiger-striped yellow cat. Familiarly, she walked across the hall into the owner's bedroom, picked the yellow cat up from the bed, held it in the crook of her arms for a while, patted it on the head, and put it back down. People who did not know Jin Ling would think that she was the store owner's child.

The hair salon was the next shop she had to pass. As she had no interest in hair and beauty matters, she did not stop but walked straight on until she came to the bicycle repair stand. Squatting there, she watched the old man work on a bicycle, chatting leisurely with him. Just then, she suddenly looked up. Mom was glaring at her with a threatening look from the balcony not far from the stand. Jin Ling got up hastily, said goodbye to the old man, and picked up the pace as she went upstairs toward her apartment.

The distance from school to home was less than two hundred meters, but it usually took her at least half an hour to complete the journey.

On one occasion, she met a young couple pushing their bicycles along the side of the road. Somehow, they began chatting. The couple was so happy they invited her to sit on the back seat of the bicycle, then dropped her off at the entrance of her apartment building.



When she got home, she told her mom about the incident. Mom's face turned pale with fright and shouted, "What on earth were you thinking! What if they had been two child kidnappers?"

Jin Ling snorted, "I'm not so naive. If they had tried to abduct me, wouldn't I have screamed?"

Mom retorted, "What if you had been abducted without you knowing, knocked out by chloroform while you were chatting with them?"

Jin Ling pouted, "I'm so fat. Who would want me? Wouldn't they be afraid I eat their money away?"

In any case, Mom generally forbade Jin Ling to talk to strangers. For example, she should not accept food from them, for it could have a sleeping pill. If the stranger took out a small bottle, she should run away—it could contain spray chloroform. Neither should she ever accept a ride in a taxi, as most kidnapping cases took place in taxis.

Jin Ling covered her ears, "Alright, alright. I'm not a little second grader anymore!"

As for Jin Ling's academic performance, the situation was somewhat complicated.

Her Chinese Language was fine, especially in that she could answer some difficult questions that needed external reading knowledge as a supplement. She always managed surprisingly well in those instances.

However, her composition was a different case. If the topic was of interest



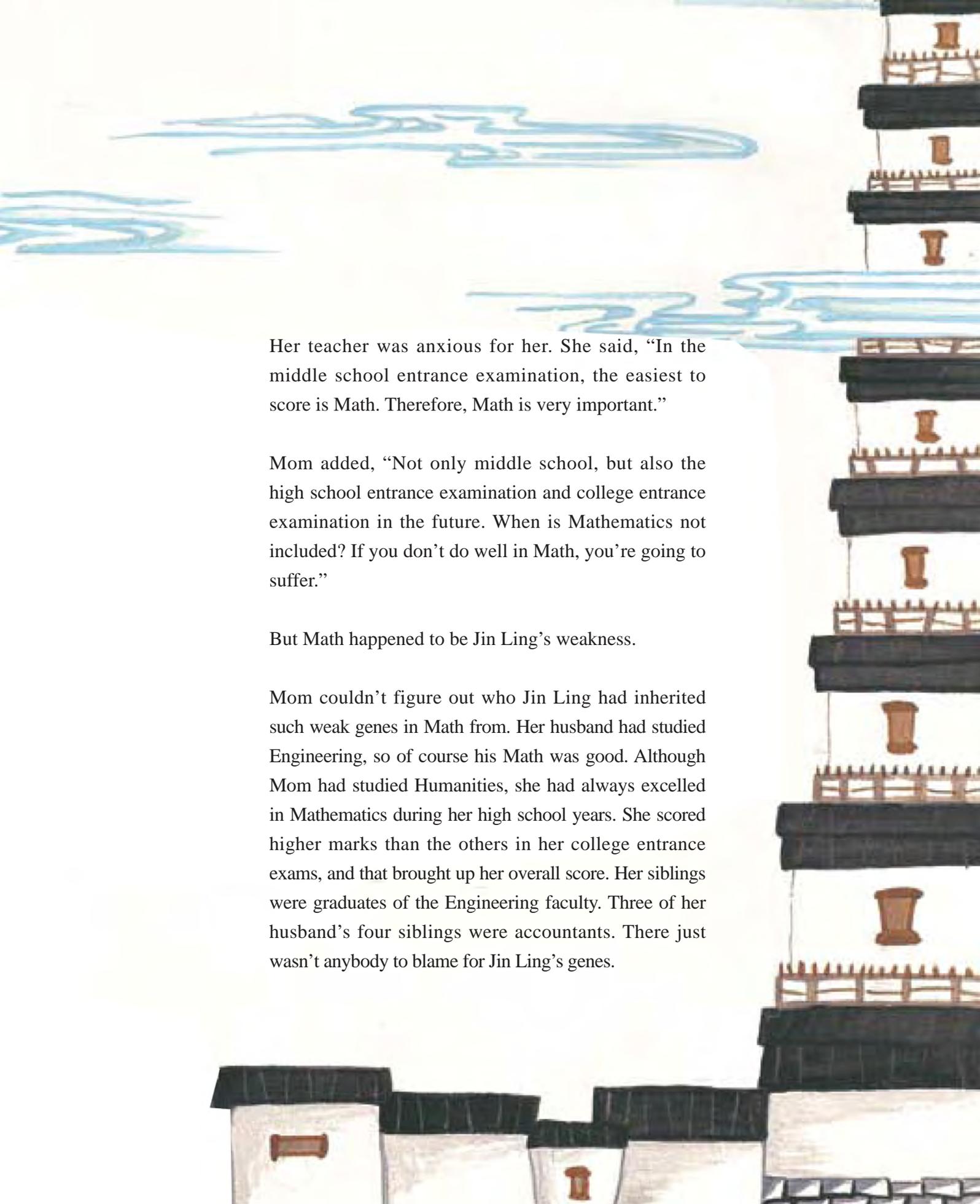
to her, her writing would show great enthusiasm, and her language would be vivid and delightful, amazing the teacher.

Unfortunately, such occasions were rare. The teacher often set topics that were dull and stiff, like “My Teacher,” “My Deskmate,” “A Walk in the Garden,” “Reflections on a Visit to the...” and so on. Such topics were about reality, not made-up stories. If her writing was so brilliant that the teacher chose to read it out to the class, wouldn’t that reveal all her inventions? Jin Ling was not brave enough to do such a thing, so she got about eighty marks for most of her compositions.

Her greatest weakness was carelessness, so she made many mistakes in writing characters. She sometimes was not able to distinguish two characters that sounded the same but were written differently, or missed out a stroke on a character. It wasn’t that she couldn’t write, but she carelessly used another character by mistake, resulting in a cross beside it. Her compositions generally had around ten to twenty wrongly written characters, and points were taken off for those mistakes.

Generally speaking, her marks for Language often hovered around eighty-five, with the highest not more than ninety and the lowest not less than eighty.

Her Math was not so good. This was her least favorite subject, especially when the four fundamental operations contained decimal points and fractions. Decimals and fractions confused her and gave her headache. Of ten sums, she might get six of them wrong. This had been Mom’s concern from the time she was little. Mom spent a lot of time coaching her at night, but there did not seem to be any improvement in her Math grades.



Her teacher was anxious for her. She said, “In the middle school entrance examination, the easiest to score is Math. Therefore, Math is very important.”

Mom added, “Not only middle school, but also the high school entrance examination and college entrance examination in the future. When is Mathematics not included? If you don’t do well in Math, you’re going to suffer.”

But Math happened to be Jin Ling’s weakness.

Mom couldn’t figure out who Jin Ling had inherited such weak genes in Math from. Her husband had studied Engineering, so of course his Math was good. Although Mom had studied Humanities, she had always excelled in Mathematics during her high school years. She scored higher marks than the others in her college entrance exams, and that brought up her overall score. Her siblings were graduates of the Engineering faculty. Three of her husband’s four siblings were accountants. There just wasn’t anybody to blame for Jin Ling’s genes.

If no one else was to be blamed, then it was that Jin Ling didn't study hard enough; she only got by. Nothing could be done with such a bad student.

Jin Ling's English scores were usually around ninety marks, which was not fantastic.

If an English exam paper was set for forty minutes, she could finish it in less than ten. When the teacher took it, he could see that she hadn't capitalized the first letter, had written the wrong phonetic symbols, or scrawled the letters illegibly. The English teacher liked Jin Ling very much because she had beautiful pronunciation and excellent listening. It was a pleasure listening to her reading and practicing conversation with her, but what could the teacher do if she had already handed her sloppily written exam? He couldn't possibly tell her, "You have made many mistakes. Take it back and correct them!" Wouldn't that be favoring her? Today's children were very sensitive to such partiality.

In one mid-term English test, Jin Ling finally got a high score of ninety-



nine. Her mother was so happy that she was in tears. Not long after that, she went to a parents' meeting at school and realized that more than twenty students in the class had scored full marks on that test.

Jin Ling was not the best, but she was also not the worst. She was just a happy, care-free child, somebody that nobody could be angry with for too long.

Unwilling to accept her daughter's poor academic performance, Jin Ling's mom tried to find out the reason for it. She regretted sending Jin Ling to school too early. Most children began school after they turned six. Mom had wanted her daughter to excel, thus registered her for school before she turned that age. Jin Ling's birthday was in September, but the registrar at the local police station had written the numeral nine with a flat circle, so Jin Ling's mother took up the pen and made the flat circle into a thick horizontal stroke to make it look like seven. When she registered her daughter for school, she got away with it. However, Mom later found out that, among her colleagues, some had made changes to their children's age in the household registration book, and others had managed to get their kids to start school earlier through personal connections. Why were other people's children so mature? After all, age didn't seem to be the reason for poor academic performance.

Jin Ling's grandma had told Mom, "Well, you can only blame yourself; you didn't give her rules since he was little."

Her analysis hit the nail on the head. Jin Ling's mother had majored in Chinese Language and in her younger days had geared her thoughts towards the Western way of thinking, advocating the European and American methods of educating children. From the moment her daughter

was able to crawl and talk, Mom had instilled in her the concept of freedom: freedom in imagination, in movement, and so forth. If Jin Ling felt like walking, she could walk, and if she felt like lying down, she could lie down. Instead of being taught words or counting numbers, she was stuffed with a large number of children stories and fairy tales, taking her into the dinosaur and space age. As a result, her imagination was greatly enriched, but her practical ability rapidly declined. She was disperse, casual, and easygoing.

A few examples of this popped up when Jin Ling just started elementary school.

Mom had called Jin Ling's school bag a "garbage bag." It was very messy and untidy. One day in class, the teacher decided to assign a piece of homework. She told the students to take out their pencils to write it down. Jin Ling hurriedly took out her pencil case from her bag. When she opened it, it was empty. The pencils, ruler, and other contents had slipped into some corner in the bag. Jin Ling put her hand in the bag to grope for a pencil. She managed to grab one, but it was so blunt it could not write. She put in her hand to grope for another one, but the lead broke. At that moment, the teacher had begun to announce the title. Jin Ling got so anxious that she took up her schoolbag and poured the contents out on the floor. With a loud crash, the pencils, eraser, sharpener and books all fell out, creating a colorful mess on the floor. The students seated around her turned to look. The class was in chaos. As a punishment, the teacher ordered Jin Ling to stand throughout the lesson. In the end, she did not get to write down the assignment and did not do her homework, so she was therefore punished again the next day, this time made to copy a book.

Her first grade Chinese Language teacher was the city's most outstanding

teacher. She frequently held “open classes.” During one of those sessions, Jin Ling felt that her shoes were too tight and her feet were uncomfortable. She quietly took them off under the desk. After a while, the teacher asked a question about synonyms. Jin Ling raised her hand enthusiastically. Thinking that Jin Ling would be very confident answering the question, the teacher called her name. The moment Jin Ling stood up, she realized that she was barefooted. Hurriedly, she looked for her shoes under her desk. She couldn’t find them. She had kicked them to the seat in front of her. Please note, in the classroom were twenty to thirty teachers from other schools. The teacher’s face turned red with anger and her nose twisted to one side.

She complained to Jin Ling’s mom, “She could have just stayed barefooted. If she hadn’t tried looking for her shoes, it wouldn’t have been so embarrassing.”

Jin Ling’s mom thought to herself, how could a six-year-old child have such behavior?

Because Jin Ling’s school bag was so messy, she often lost her things. On average, she lost an eraser every two days. Mom got tired of buying erasers, so she brought home a whole box, but that didn’t last long either. Soon Jin Ling began asking for erasers again.

Mom said, “What about the box I bought you?”

Jin Ling replied innocently, “There are no more left.”

Mom went to take a look at the box and, as expected, it was empty.

This time, she got really mad. Grabbing Jin Ling and forcing her onto the bed, Mom gave her a spanking. “When you come home tomorrow, I’m going to check your eraser. If you lose one again, there will be no dinner for you!”

The next day when Jin Ling got home from school, Mom blocked the doorway, “Where is your eraser?” Jin Ling quickly declared, “I didn’t lose it today,” and started looking for it in her schoolbag.

But no matter how hard she searched, she just couldn’t find it. She looked in the big pocket, the small pocket, the pencil case, and even the lining of the bag, but there was no trace of any eraser. Mom had a stern expression and raised her hand doing the gesture of spanking. This was too much. Even if they were rich, they could not afford such irresponsible waste.



In the nick of time, Jin Ling suddenly squealed, “The eraser is here!”

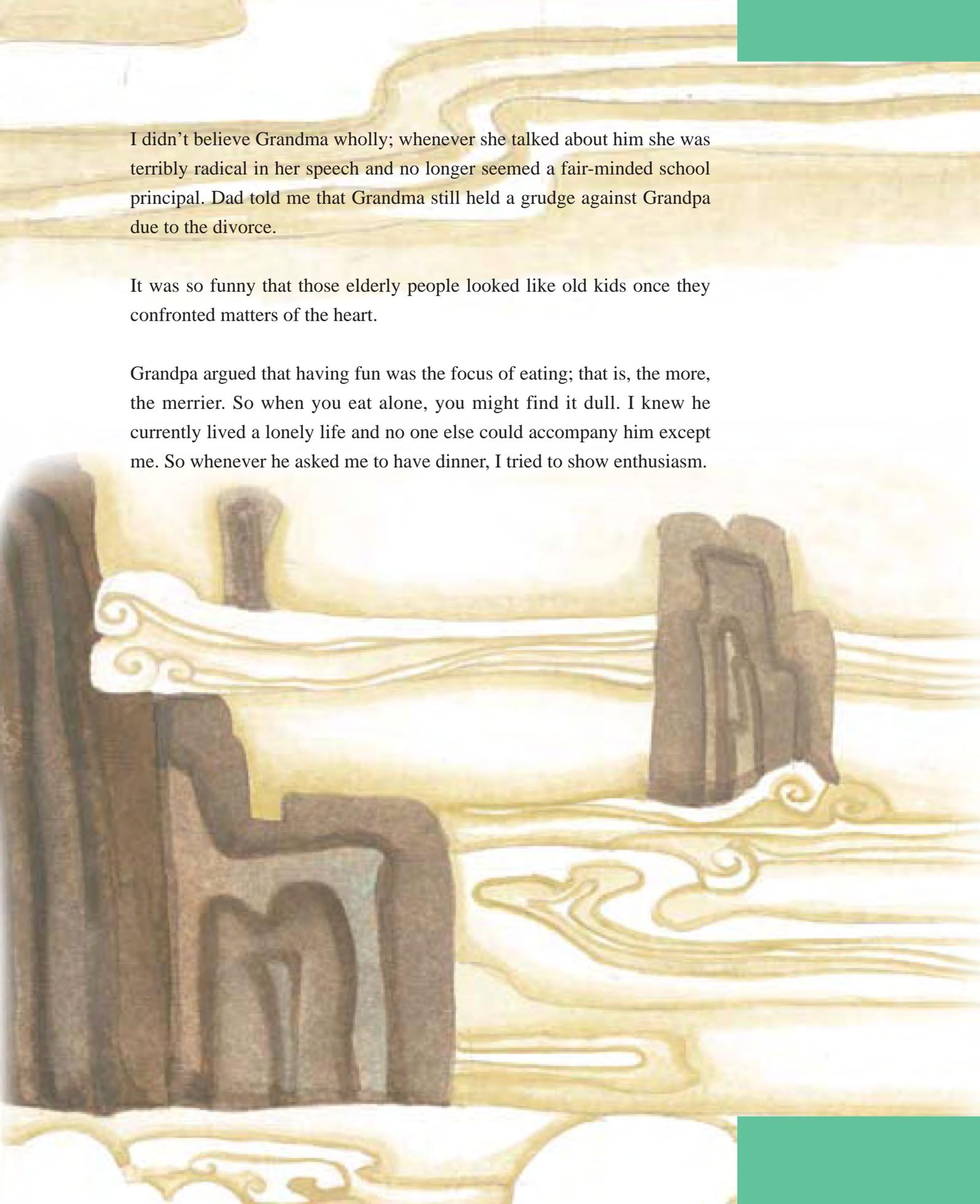
She opened her palm to reveal a damp piece of eraser that was steaming with heat. Before school was over, she had been reminding herself not to forget the eraser, so she had decided to hold it in her hand as she walked home. As usual, she had been distracted along the way home. She even had forgotten that the eraser was in her own hand!

This is our story’s hero, Jin Ling. What do you think, is she funny or annoying?

“Dad Wants to Be a Responsible Man”  
(from *Christmas Eve*)

Early on Saturday morning, maternal Grandpa called and told me that a seafood restaurant had newly opened on the Northern Street of Qingyang city. Four big bright red lanterns were hanging in the front door while flower baskets were put in a long row along the street. The “Life” Program Group from Qingyang Television Station broadcast from there. The “foretaste” host, seeing the delicious food covering the table, couldn’t help crying out, which was really funny. “Let’s go and have a try,” urged maternal Grandpa.

My grandpa had divorced and remarried. Then he retired and became a widower. He had lived quite a simple life. He might even spare a meatball from the fast food dish for the next meal. However, we were not sure what happened to him recently, since he had begun to indulge in eating more and had made up his mind to taste all food around Qingyang city within half a year and savor all kinds of new dishes. It seemed that he would never be reconciled if he didn’t spend all of his savings. Grandma sneered, explaining that the retired teachers had got a handsome rise in pension recently. Grandpa suddenly became a gourmet.



I didn't believe Grandma wholly; whenever she talked about him she was terribly radical in her speech and no longer seemed a fair-minded school principal. Dad told me that Grandma still held a grudge against Grandpa due to the divorce.

It was so funny that those elderly people looked like old kids once they confronted matters of the heart.

Grandpa argued that having fun was the focus of eating; that is, the more, the merrier. So when you eat alone, you might find it dull. I knew he currently lived a lonely life and no one else could accompany him except me. So whenever he asked me to have dinner, I tried to show enthusiasm.

Dad joked, “Ren Xiaoxiao, you are now playing a role as a box of tiger balm, which can be used everywhere.”

Sighing deeply, I replied: “What else can I do? It must be my fate to have been born with the burden of six great mountains known as Dad, Mom, Dad’s parents and Mom’s parents.”

Dad pitied me saying, “Ah! It is not easy, I know.”

I also knew. I had to cope with the complicated relationship cautiously among the six people, which was a mighty project. In my opinion, the relevant departments should set up a “Family Unity and Harmony Prize,” and then solemnly award it to me.

Maternal Grandpa was waiting for me downstairs at eleven sharp. He had never entered our house since my parents divorced. Convinced that the divorce was entirely my dad’s fault, Grandpa hated him. He said, if Dad had taken a bit more responsibility for the family or if he had had even a little ambition in regard to a career, his daughter would not have gone away, leaving her only son. And if Sang Yuting had not left, Grandma might have reconsidered remarrying him after his second wife’s death, so probably they would already be living together happily. So he wouldn’t be so lonely and desperate these days.

I could understand maternal Grandpa very well. That was why Grandma always called me “Little adult.” Anyway, I could do nothing about that. Adults had their own ideas and choices, and children should not disturb them.

It was not very cold in late autumn. Maternal Grandpa already stood in

front of the door, wearing a long dark gray trench coat and a peaked cap and looking quite handsome, so he got quite a few passing glances.

His first sentence when he saw me was always “You are too thin” or “You need to eat more.” This was supposed to be the reason he asked me out for dinner.

Thin and tall, he strode forward so fast that I had to trot to keep up with him. What’s more, he hardly looked back while walking, and never realized it was so hard for me to run after him. My grandma believed he was too selfish to take care of others. She said she used to care little about the family these years only because she was a busy principal, and it was inevitable for anyone in such a post. If maternal Grandpa could understand her, they wouldn’t have been divorced when they were so old. I ran a few steps to catch up with him and asked, “Have you found an appropriate nursing home?”

He became cautious immediately and looked back at me with suspicion, “Did your grandma ask you to pry?”

I shook my head quickly. “No, it is me. I have been thinking about it for days.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet,” he was somewhat relieved and said, “I called your mother and asked her to take time off to come back. We should hold a family discussion. She is my daughter and can’t walk out on me.”

I inwardly groaned, “If Sang Yuting comes back, there will be more unexpected things happening in our family.”

It took us twenty minutes to get to the Northern Street of Qingyang. Maternal Grandpa said that the city had tripled in size in the recent decade. Numerous main roads had been added to the layout. However, the city looked just like many other big cities and the people couldn't find any trace of the old one. The government had already demolished all the grand courtyards and blue brick patterned walls. What a pity! Maternal Grandpa used to teach Geography in a middle school. Whenever he talked about old days, he would become melancholic.

The newly opened seafood restaurant seemed known only to a few people. Although many fireworks outside the door were not cleared away deliberately, there were only a handful of customers inside. Once maternal Grandpa and I came in, a few waitresses in red cheongsam came rushing over and chanted together: "Welcome, boss!"

Who on earth was the boss? Was it impossible for ordinary citizens to come for dinner? I felt their greetings were not only absurd but also vulgar.

With his hands behind his back, maternal Grandpa walked slowly to a row of glass fish tanks and scrutinized the swimming fish and shrimps, sleeping turtles with heads shrunken, and crawling crabs said to be from Yangcheng Lake. Two solemn waitresses waited close by, with menus and ballpoint pens in their hands. However, after a long scrutiny, maternal grandpa only ordered the cheapest one called "pig-tail fish." He stressed it should be braised and served on a layer of fresh lilies.

Failing to gain big business, the waitresses turned their backs on us to express their discontent at our meager order. Maternal Grandpa smiled smugly and told me that a good diner didn't choose the most expensive



dish but the best one. Even though the pig-tail fish looked terribly ugly and might not be probably served in the important occasions, it tasted delicious.

While waiting for the dishes, maternal Grandpa asked about my dad carelessly: “Is he still working at nights but sleeping in the daytime? Does he really want to stay at home to hatch chicks all his life?”

I immediately reported that Dad had been employed to teach in the juvenile prison, and I even exaggerated his salary to an enormous figure.

Maternal Grandpa smiled incredulously. “You are boasting for him.”

“I am serious. He has been working for a week already.”

“He won’t last long! I bet.”

I could say nothing: my dad was really such a man. But I still felt sad: maternal Grandpa not only looked down upon my dad, but also didn’t believe in him. Maternal Grandpa always commented in regard to Dad. “A fox may grow gray, but never good,” he used to say, expressing his straightforward and resolute opinion: a mixture of contempt and disappointment.

I silently said, “Did you hear, Dad? Nobody is optimistic about you, but you should encourage yourself and do your best in this.”

Six boiling pig-tail fish were served on a plate. They were as long as the chopsticks and a littler thicker than eels. They were really strange. Maternal Grandpa had a taste and praised the cook: the temperature was

right, and the fish were very fresh and tender. But I didn't think they were tasty. Maybe the conversation about my dad just now made me lose my appetite.

When I got home, Dad was not there. He had left me a note telling me that he went out to Xinhua Bookstore to buy several Chinese reference books.

Actually things were not that easy for Dad either. Although he had majored in Chinese at university, he didn't have any teaching experience before. So he had to revise by himself first if he wanted to be a competent teacher.

Well, Dad seemed to have learned a lesson from the past and be ready to take up such a responsibility.

Was it perhaps because of Zhang Cheng's composition? Did that composition make Dad see a bright future and hope? I really hoped so, too.

I had too much homework to do on weekends. The Chinese teacher, the Math teacher, as well as the English teacher seemed to be in fierce competition to impose the biggest burden. The one who assigned less homework might consider it as a loss, and then the next week, they would absolutely double the homework load so as to make up the loss. But I supposed the teachers themselves were unwilling to do so, as they had to correct stereotyped homework repeatedly, which might even drive them crazy. Did my grandma, as the principal, ask them to do it? I couldn't be sure.

Someone shrilly called my name downstairs, “Ren Xiaoxiao! Ren Xiaoxiao!”

I rushed to the balcony and looked down. It was the last person I wanted to see—He Lala. She was pushing a bicycle with a big box tied to the back seat. The bicycle seemed quite heavy, as it was leaning to one side.

“Come down and carry it upstairs,” she ordered.

I didn’t dare to waste even one minute, so I rushed downstairs leaving the door wide open, and tried to carry the box in a hurry.

“Aren’t you stupid? How can you move it without first unfastening it?” she said angrily.

A few red words were printed on the carton: “High-quality Fuji Apples.” They must be her mother’s welfare gift. The TV station ran efficiently with great profits, and often had goods to be distributed to staff. Sometimes, her mother also asked He Lala to deliver some to us. Obviously unwilling to do this, He Lala would always get mad at me, which I could figure out even with my toes.

I waited until He Lala unhitched the rope, and then we lifted down the box together. After she pushed her bicycle close to the building and locked it, we carried the box upstairs in tandem.

“Damn apples, so heavy,” mumbled He Lala all the way, “How lucky you are, Ren Xiaoxiao! I am wondering what makes my mother always send you something nice to please you every few days.”

“I’d rather you didn’t come,” I whispered.

“You mean it?” Boom! She suddenly threw the carton on the ground.

“Then what if I kick them down?”

What else could I do when coming across such a grisly girl? The only thing I could do was to shut my mouth and clutch the carton as close as possible.

As a result, she got embarrassed and pulled the carton towards her while giving me a dirty look.

Entering the house, I dragged the carton to the balcony. The cardboard rubbed against the floor tiles, leaving a long whitish mark. He Lala went to the kitchen directly to wash her hands. Disgusted with our dirty towel, she didn’t use it and came out with the water drops dripping from her hands. She inspected the entire apartment as if she were an imperial envoy.

“How long since you watered the money tree? Look at these dry leaves!” I hurried to water it.

“Water it around the basin edge! You mustn’t start from the head, or you will kill it!”

She was never at loss for some instruction.

“It seems that your dad never wipes the computer, does he? Look at the ash on the keyboard,” she said, pointing at it.

“And the floor hasn’t been cleaned for many days either, right? It is so greasy and dirty!”

She inspected and spat out accusations, but never did anything to improve things, which was different from her mum’s action. Whenever her mother saw the mess, she would roll up her sleeves and clean the house at once without saying a word. I’d prefer her mother to come more often.

Finally, she flexed her middle finger and rapped me on the head: “Behave yourself! Remember to call my mum and say thank you.”

It was totally a tone of the elder to the younger, which upset me a little.

What was worse, she sat on the sofa unexpectedly while stretching her hand in front of me: “Bring me all your homework of the major subjects.”

I finally cried out: “Why should I do it?”

She glanced at me with a cutting look. “Don’t be silly! I wouldn’t like to check your damn homework either. Your paternal grandpa asked me to do so. I am just fulfilling my supervisory responsibility. He said that your dad was too lazy and has no sense of responsibility. If he just lets you go, you will obviously become like him.”

I really wanted to kill myself by putting my head through the wall. I had already the burden of six great mountains above my head, and here came out a seventh one without any reason. If both my parents remarried in the future, I would have an eighth or even a ninth one. How would I live within such a tragedy?

“Go. And. Fetch. Your. Homework,” she ordered tersely, emphasizing each word.

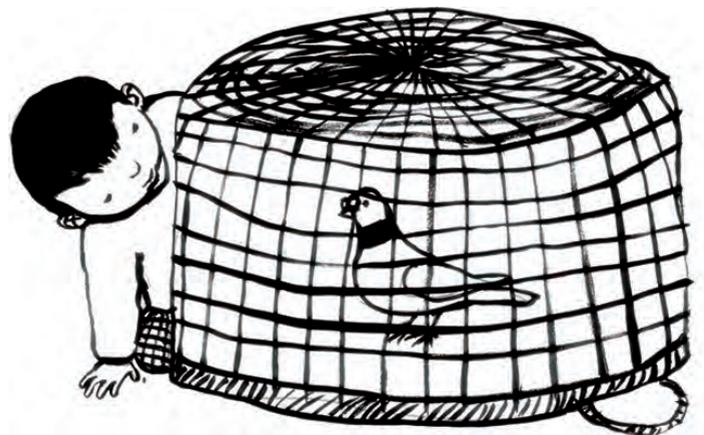
Thoroughly intimidated, I reluctantly gave her the homework.

She sat in the sofa elegantly with her body slanting slightly, her arms resting on the armrests, and her legs overlapping comfortably. She then turned the pages quickly, threw them aside casually, and then stretched out her hand out for another exercise book offered by me. I thought to myself: if there is a phrase to describe her, it must be “insufferably arrogant.”

But why was she insufferably arrogant toward me? My family name was Ren, but hers was He. What was the matter with my grandpa?

Fortunately, my academic performance was excellent, for I dared not play the fool with the teachers over my homework. He Lala had intended to find fault, but failed.

“How can you write so few words in such an essay? The length of the



article was even shorter than a rabbit's tail. It is really funny. How could you do very well in the applied problems, but badly in calculating? And look at your handwriting! Did you write with your left hand... can you see how ugly it is?"

Watching her lips opening and closing repeatedly, I decided to keep silent. If I didn't answer her, she might become bored and end the conversation sooner.

At last, she realized it and stood up, saying loudly with a faint smile: "Ren Xiaoxiao! To tell the truth, you are resisting me by keeping silent."

"No, I didn't."

She glanced at me again: "Who do you think you are? I have past the age of eight. Honestly speaking, I can even tell exactly how many roundworms there are in your stomach."

Please! Don't be disgusting.

She went downstairs hurriedly and angrily without even saying goodbye. Her footsteps were so heavy that it sounded like a man's. I didn't know whether she would report it to my paternal grandpa. Anyway, I didn't care.

In the evening, Dad sat at the desk and tried to create a course schedule earnestly. At the beginning, he thought it would be easy to teach the students and just lead them to appreciate world-famous works, since he was supposed to teach them literature. Nevertheless, it was very far from being the case: the level of the students was generally too low and it was

clear that they could not understand most literature. Dad thought it over, and eventually bought a Chinese textbook for junior three students. He said it might be better to lead them to learn from the elementary to the advanced. Otherwise, they would be frightened, or even never come back for his class, which might humiliate him a lot.

He picked up an article from the book and tried to input it into the computer so that he could print multiple copies of it and distribute them to the students as lecture notes. I moved close to him and read the words on the screen through his shoulder with great interest. My dad was indeed an Internet geek and was really skilled at typing. His ten fingers kept moving on the keyboard; the words jumped out one by one on the screen like the kids dancing happily.

I read carefully what he typed:

And a summer morning—a morning in July! Who but the sportsman knows how soothing it is to wander at daybreak among the underwoods? The print of your fee lies in a green line on the grass, white with dew. You part the drenched bushes; you are met by a rush of the warm fragrance stored up in the night; the air is saturated with the fresh bitterness of wormwood, the honey sweetness of buckwheat and clover; in the distance an oak of wood stands like a wall, and glows and listens in the sun; it is still fresh, but already the approach of heat is felt. The head is faint and dizzy from the excess of sweet scents. The copse stretches on endlessly...

My breath blew on my dad's hair. He turned round. "What do you think? Isn't it amazing?"

I asked, “Was it written by a hunter?”

He laughed, “Aha, absolutely wrong! It was written by a great Russian writer—Turgenev. Of course, what he wrote must be his own life experience. It is not easy to find such a nice writing among contemporary works.”

“Why?”

“Since both forests and lawns have gone, where on earth can people go to enjoy that kind of pleasure? As people now are concerned about the food and clothing in their life, how will they enjoy the beauty of nature?”

What Dad said was a little sad and made him different from what Dad used to be as an ignorant man. After all, he had his own idea about the world.

I thought for a while and told him, “The child who is good at compositions must like the article you choose”.

Dad was extraordinarily excited, “Are you sure?”

“Sure, he loves the fields!”

Dad looked upward, laughing, “Ren Xiaoxiao, you are so clever. The one I’ve chosen is exactly for him!”

I got it. Such was my Dad. If he fell in love with something, he would be addicted soon. And he wouldn’t bother himself to consider much about what consequence it might have.

In a word, Dad was bent on training Zhang Cheng to be his star pupil.