# *Shen Congwen (1902–1988)*

## XIAOXIAO

*Translated by Eugene Chen Eoyang*

Just about every day around the twelfth month,[1] the folks at home seem to be blowing the bamboo pipes for a wedding.

Following the pipes a gaily decked bridal palanquin appears, gliding forward on the shoulders of two bearers. The girl is shut up tight inside, and even though she is wearing a festive gown of greens and reds, something she doesn't get to wear every day—she can't help sobbing to herself. For, in her heart, a young woman knows that becoming a bride and leaving her mother to become, in time, someone else's mother, means having to face a host of new and unexpected problems. It's almost like entering a trance, to sleep in the same bed with someone you hardly know in order to carry on the ancestral line. Naturally, it is somewhat frightening to think of these things, so if one is inclined to cry in such a circumstance—as so many before have cried—is it any wonder?

There are, of course, some who don't cry. Xiaoxiao did not cry when she got married. She had been orphaned, and had been sent to an uncle on a farm to be brought up. All day long, carrying a small, wide-brimmed bamboo hat, she had to look for dog droppings by the side of the road and in the gullies. For her, marriage meant simply a transfer from one family to another. So, when

1. References to "months" in this story allude to the lunar calendar; when the term is converted into months in the solar calendar, the name of the month—December, January, etc.—will be given. The twelfth month is roughly February.



the day came, all she could do was to laugh about it, with no sense of shame or fear. She was scarcely aware of what she was getting into: all she knew was that she was to become someone's new daughter-in-law.

Xiaoxiao was eleven when she married, and Little Husband was hardly two years old—almost ten years younger, and not long ago suckling at his mother's breast. When she entered the household she called him "Sonny," according to local custom. Her daily chore was to take "Sonny" to play under the willow tree in front of the house or by the stream; when he was hungry, to give him something to eat; when he fussed, to soothe him; to pluck pumpkin blossoms and dog-grass to crown Little Husband with, or to soothe him with kisses and sweet nothings: "Sonny, now there, hush, there, there." And with that she would kiss the grimy little face: the boy would break out in smiles. In good spirits again, the child would act up once more, and with his tiny fingers, he would paw at Xiaoxiao's hair—the brown hair that was untidy and unkempt most of the time. Sometimes, when he had pulled too hard at her braid, the knot of red wool would come loose, and she would have to cuff him a few times: naturally he bawled. Xiaoxiao, now on the verge of tears herself, would point to the boy's tear-drenched face and say: "Now, now, you naughty thing, you'd better quit that."

Through fair and foul, every day she carried her "husband," doing this and that around the house, wherever her services were needed. On occasion she would go down to the stream to wash out clothes, to rinse out the diapers, but she found time to pick out colorful striped snails to amuse the boy with as he sat nearby. When she went to sleep she would dream dreams that a girl her age dreams; she dreamt that she found a cache of copper coins at the back gate, or some other place, and that she had good things to eat; she dreamt that she was climbing a tree; she dreamt she was a fish, floating freely in the water; she dreamt she was so light and lithe that she flew up clear to the stars, where there was no one, but all she could see was a flash of white and of gold, and she cried aloud for her mother—whereupon she woke up, her heart still thumping. The people next door would scold her: "You silly thing! What were you thinking of?

> Those who do nothing at all but play
> Wind up with bad dreams at end of day."

When she heard this, Xiaoxiao made no response, but merely giggled to herself, thinking of the good dreams that her husband's crying sometimes interrupted. He would sleep by his mother's side, so that it would be easier for her to breast-feed him, but there were times when he had too much milk or was colicky. Then he would wake up in the middle of the night crying, and Xiaoxiao would have to get up and take him to the bathroom. This happened often. Her husband cried so much, her mother-in-law didn't know what to do with him, so Xiaoxiao had to crawl out of bed bleary-eyed and tiptoe in—brushing the cobwebs out of her sleepy eyes—to take the boy in her arms, and distract him with

the lamp or the twinkling of the stars. If that didn't work, she'd peck and whistle, make faces for the child, blather on like a baby—"hey, hey, look—look at the cat"—until her husband broke out in a smile. They would play like this for a bit, and then he would feel drowsy and close his eyes. When he was asleep, she'd put him back to bed, watching over him awhile, and, hearing in the distance the insistent sound of a cock crowing, she couldn't help knowing about what time it was when she huddled back in her tiny bed. At daybreak, though she had had a sleepless night, she would flick her eyes open and shut to see the yellow-and-purple sunflowers outdoors shifting forms before her very eyes: that was a real treat.

When Xiaoxiao was married off, to become the "little wife" of a pint-sized little child, she wasn't any the worse for wear; one look at her figure was proof enough of that. She was like an unnoticed sapling at a corner of the garden, sprouting forth big leaves and branches after days of wind and rain. This little girl—as if unmindful of her tiny husband—grew bigger day by day.

To speak of summer nights is to dream. People seek the cool of the evening after summer heat: they sit in the middle of the courtyard, waving their rush-fans, looking up at the stars in the sky or the fireflies in the corners, listening to the "Weaver Maid" crickets—on the roofs of the pumpkin-sheds—clicking away interminably on their "looms." The sounds from near and far are intertwined like the sound of rain, and when the hay-scented wind falls full on the face, that is a time when people are of a mind to tell jokes.

Xiaoxiao grew very tall, and she would often climb the sloping sides of the haystack, carrying in her arms her already sleeping husband, softly singing self-improvised folk melodies. The more she sang, the drowsier she felt—until she too was almost asleep.

In the middle of the courtyard, her in-laws, the grandparents, and two farm-hands sat at random on small wooden stools.

By Grandfather's side there was a tobacco-coil, whose embers glowed in the dark. This coil, made of mugwort, had the effect of repelling long-legged mosquitoes. It was wound around at Grandfather's feet like a black snake. From time to time. Grandfather would pick it up and wave it about.

Thinking about the day in the fields. Grandfather said: "Say, I heard that Old Qin said that, day before yesterday, there were a few coeds passing through town."

Everyone roared with laughter.

And what was behind the laughter? Everyone had the impression that coeds didn't wear braids; wearing the hair in the form of a sparrow's tail made them look like nuns, and yet somehow not like nuns. They wore their clothes in the manner of foreigners, yet they didn't look like foreigners. They ate, behaved in such a way . . . well, in a word, everything seemed out of place with them, and the slightest mention of coeds was cause enough for laughter.



Xiaoxiao didn't understand much of what was going on, and so she didn't laugh at all. Grandfather spoke again. He said:

"Xiaoxiao, when you grow up, you'll be a coed too." At this, everyone laughed once more.

Now, Xiaoxiao was not stupid when it came to people, and she figured this wasn't flattering to her, so she said:

"Grandpa, I won't become a coed."

"But you look like a coed. It won't do if you don't become one."

"No, I certainly won't."

The bystanders mined this for a laugh and egged her on:

"Xiaoxiao, what Grandpa says is right. It's not right if you don't become a coed."

Xiaoxiao was flustered and didn't know what was going on.

"All right, if I have to, I have to." Actually, Xiaoxiao had no idea what was wrong with being a coed.

The whole idea of coeds would always be thought of as queer in these parts. Every year, come June, when the start of the so-called "summer vacation" had finally arrived, they would come in small groups from some outlandish metropolis, and, looking for some remote retreat, they would pass through the village. In the eyes of the local people, it was almost as if these people had dropped down from an altogether different world, dressed in the most bizarre ways, their behavior even more improbable. On the days these coeds passed through, the whole village would come up with joke after joke.

Grandpapa was an old-timer from the region, and, because he was thinking about the carryings-on of the coeds he knew in the big city, he thought it was funny to urge Xiaoxiao to become one. As soon as he made the crack, he couldn't help laughing, but he also had in mind the way Xiaoxiao felt, and so the joke wasn't totally innocuous.

The coeds that Grandfather knew were of a type: they wore clothes without regard to the weather; they ate whether they were hungry or full; they didn't go to sleep until late at night; during the day they worked at nothing at all, but sang and played ball or read books from abroad. They knew how to spend money: with what they spent in a year, you could buy at least sixteen water buffaloes. In the capital cities of the provinces, whenever they wanted to go anywhere, they'd never dream of walking, but would climb instead into a big "box," which took them everywhere. In the cities there were all sorts of "boxes," big and small, all motorized. At school, boys and girls go to class together, and, when they get acquainted, the girls sleep overnight with the boys, with no thought of a go-between or a matchmaker, or even a dowry. This is what they call being "free." They sometimes serve as district officials and bring families to their posts; their husbands are called "Masters" still and their children "Little Master." They don't tend cattle themselves, but they'll drink cow's milk and sheep's milk like little calves and little lambs; the milk they buy is canned.

When they have nothing better to do, they go to a theater, which is built like a huge temple, and take from their pockets a silver dollar (a dollar of their money can buy five setting hens hereabouts). With this they purchase a piece of paper in the form of a ticket, which they take inside, so that they can sit down and watch foreigners performing shadow-plays. When offended, they won't curse at you or cry. By the time they are twenty-four, some still won't marry, while others at thirty or forty still have the cheek to contemplate marriage. They are not afraid of men, thinking men can't wrong them, for if they do, they take the men to court and insist that the magistrate fine them. Sometimes they spend the fine themselves, and sometimes they share it with the magistrate. Of course, they don't wash clothes or cook meals, and they certainly don't raise hogs and feed hens; when they have children they hire a servant to look after them for only five or ten dollars a month so that they can spend all day going to the theater and playing cards, or reading all those good-for-nothing books.

In a word, everything about them is weird, totally different from the lives of farmers, and some of their goings-on are not to be believed. When Xiaoxiao heard her grandfather saying all this, which explained everything, she felt vague stirrings of unrest, and took to imagining herself as a "coed." Would she behave like the "coeds" Grandfather talked about? In any case, there was nothing frightful about these "coeds," and so these notions began to occupy this simple girl's thoughts for the first time.

Because of the picture that Grandfather had painted of the "coed," Xiaoxiao giggled to herself for some time. But when she had collected herself, she said:

"Grandpa, when the 'coeds' come tomorrow, please tell me. I want a look."

"Watch out, or they'll make a maidservant out of you!"

"I'm not afraid of them."

"Oh, but they read all those foreign books, recite scripture, and you're still not afraid of them?"

"They can recite the 'Bodhisattva Guanyin Dispels Disaster' sutra or 'The Curse of the Monkey Sun' for all I care. I'm not afraid."

"They'll bite people, like the officials; they only eat simple folk; they munch even the bones and don't spit up the remains. Are you sure you're not scared?"

Xiaoxiao replied firmly: "No, I'm not scared."

At the time, Xiaoxiao was carrying her husband, who, apparently for no reason, broke out of a sound sleep crying. Daughter-in-law used the tones of a mother and, half in reassurance, half in remonstrance, said:

"Sonny, Sonny, you mustn't cry, the voracious coeds are coming!"

Her husband continued to cry, and there was no choice but to stand up and walk him about. Xiaoxiao carried him off, leaving Grandfather, who went on talking about other things.

From that moment on, Xiaoxiao remembered what "coed" meant. When she dreamt, she would often dream about being a coed, about being one of them. It was as if she too had sat in one of those motorized boxes, though she felt they didn't go much faster than she did. In her dream, the box seemed to resemble a granary, and there were ash-gray mice with little red, piggy eyes, darting all over the place, sometimes squirming through the cracks, their slimy tails sticking out behind them.



With this development, it was only natural that Grandfather would stop calling her "little maidservant" or "Xiaoxiao" and would call her "little coed." When it caught her off guard, Xiaoxiao would turn around involuntarily.

In the country, one day is like any other day in the world: they change only with the season. People waste each day as it comes, in the same way that Xiaoxiao and her kind hang on to each day; each gets his share, everything is as it should be. A lot of city sophisticates while away their summers in soft silk, indulging in good food and drink, not to mention other pleasures. For Xiaoxiao and her family, however, summer means hard work, producing ten catties or more of fine hemp and twenty or thirty wagonloads of melons a day.

The little daughter-in-law Xiaoxiao, on a summer day, must tend to her husband as well as spin four catties of hemp. By August, when the farmhands harvest the melons, she would enjoy seeing piled high in rows on the ground the dust-covered pumpkin melons, each as big as a pot. The time had come to collect the harvest, and now the courtyard was filled with great big red and brown leaves, blown from the branches of the trees in the grove behind the house. Xiaoxiao stood by the melons, and she was working a large leaf into a hat for her husband to play with.

There was a farmhand called Motley Mutt,[2] about twenty years old, who took Xiaoxiao's husband to the date tree for some dates: one whack with a bamboo stick, and the ground would be covered with dates.

"Brother Motley Mutt, no more, please. Too much and you won't be able to eat them all."

Despite this warning, he didn't budge. It was as if, on account of the little husband's yen for dates, Motley Mutt wouldn't listen. So, Xiaoxiao warned her little husband:

"Sonny, Sonny, come over here, don't take any more. You'll get a bellyache from eating all that raw fruit!"

Her husband obeyed. Grabbing an armful of dates, he came over to Xiaoxiao, and offered her some.

"Sis, eat. Here's a big one."

"No, I won't eat it."

"Come on, just one."

She had her hands full: how could she stop to eat one? She was busily putting the hat together, and wished she had some help.

"Sonny, why don't you put a date in my mouth?"

---

2. *Huagou*, literally "piebald dog." The phrase is both appellation and description.

Her husband did as he was told, and when he did he thought it was fun and came out with a laugh.

She wanted him to drop the dates so that he could help her hold the hat together while she added a few more leaves.

Her husband did as he was bidden, but he couldn't sit still, all the while singing and humming. The child was always like a cat, prone to mischief when in a good mood.

"Sonny, what song are you singing there?"

"Motley Mutt taught me this mountain song."

"Sing it properly so that I can follow."

Husband held on to the brim of the hat, and sang what he could remember of the song.

> Clouds rise in the skies, clouds become flowers;
> Among the cornstalks, plant beans for ruth;
> The beans will undermine the stalks of corn,
> And young maidens choke off flowering youth.
> Clouds rise in the skies, one after another
> In the ground, graves are dug, grave upon grave;
> Fair maids wash bowls, bowl after bowl,
> And in their beds serve knave after knave.

The meaning of the song was lost on husband, and when he finished, he asked her if she liked it. Xiaoxiao said she did, asking where it came from, and even though she knew that Motley Mutt had taught him the song, she still wanted him to tell her.

"Motley Mutt—he taught me. He knows lots of songs, but I . . . gotta grow up before he'll sing them."

When she realized that Motley Mutt could sing, Xiaoxiao said: "Brother Motley Mutt, Brother Motley Mutt, won't you sing a proper song for me?"

But that Motley Mutt, his face was as coarse as his heart; he had a touch of the vulgar about him, and, knowing that Xiaoxiao wanted a song, and sensing that she was about at the age to understand, he sang for her the ballad of the ten-year-old bride married to the one-year-old groom. The story says that as the wife is older, she can stray a bit because the husband is still an infant, not yet weaned, so leave him to suckle at his mother's breasts. Of course, Little Husband understood nothing at all of this song; Xiaoxiao, on the other hand, had but an inkling. When she had heard it, Xiaoxiao put on airs, as if to indicate she understood it all. Affecting outrage, she said to Motley Mutt:

"Brother Motley Mutt, you stop that! That song's not nice."

But Brother Motley Mutt took exception: "But it is a nice song."

"Oh, no it isn't. It isn't a nice song."

Motley Mutt rarely said much: he had sung his song; if he had offended anyone, he wouldn't sing again, that's all. He could see that she understood a little of what he sang, and he was afraid that she would tell on him to Grandfather; then he'd really be in for it, so he changed the subject to coeds. He asked Xiaoxiao if she had ever seen coeds exercising in public and singing Western songs.



If Motley hadn't brought this up, Xiaoxiao would have long ago forgotten all about coeds. But now that he mentioned it, she was curious to know if he had seen any lately. She was dying to see them.

While he was moving the melons from the shed to a corner of the courtyard wall, Motley told her stories about coeds singing foreign songs—all of which he had originally heard from Grandfather. To her face, he boasted of having seen four coeds on the main road, each with a flag in her hands, marching down the road perspiring and singing away just like soldiers on parade. It goes without saying that all this was some nonsense he had cooked up. But the stories inflamed Xiaoxiao's imagination. And all because Motley characterized them as instances of "freedom."

Motley was one of those clownish, leering, earthy types. When he heard Xiaoxiao say (with a measure of admiration): "My, Brother Motley, but you have big arms," he would say: "Oh, but that's not all that's big!"

"You've got such a large build."

"I'm big all over."

Xiaoxiao didn't understand this at all; she just thought he was being silly, and so she laughed.

After Xiaoxiao had left, carrying her husband off, a fellow who picked melons with Motley, and who had the nickname "Mumbles" (he was not much given to talk),[3] spoke out on this occasion for once.

"Motley, you're really awful. She's a twelve-year-old virgin, and she's still got twelve years before her wedding!"

Without so much as a word. Motley went up to the farmhand, slapped him, and then walked to the date tree to pick up the fruit that had dropped off.

By the time of the autumn melons harvest, one could reckon a full year and a half that Xiaoxiao had been with her husband.

The days passed—days of frost and snow, sunny days, and rainy days—and everyone said how grown-up Xiaoxiao was. Heaven kept watch over her; she drank cold water, ate coarse gruel, and was never sick the year round; she grew and blossomed. Although Grandmama became something of a nemesis, and tried to keep her from growing up too fast, Xiaoxiao flourished in the clean country air, undaunted by any trial or ordeal.

When Xiaoxiao was fourteen, she had the figure of an adult, but her heart was still as blithe and as unschooled as that of a child.

When one is bigger, one gets a heavier burden of household chores. Besides twisting hemp, spinning thread, washing, looking after her husband, she had

3. *Yaba*, literally "mute"; a derisive appellation, referring to his customary inarticulateness.

odd jobs like getting feed for the pigs or working at the mill, flossing silk, and weaving. She was expected to learn everything. It was understood that anyone who could make an extra effort would fit in a few chores to be done in their own quarters: the coarse hemp and spun silk that Xiaoxiao had gathered in two or three years were enough to keep her busy for three months at the crude shuttle in her room.

Her husband had long ago been weaned. Mother-in-law had a new son, and so her five-year-old—Xiaoxiao's husband—became Xiaoxiao's sole charge. Whatever happened, wherever she went, her husband followed her around. Husband was a little afraid of her in some ways, as if she were his mother, and so he behaved himself. All in all, they got along pretty well.

Gradually, as the locality became more progressive, Grandfather would change his jokes to: "Xiaoxiao, for the sake of freedom, you ought to cut off your braids." By this time Xiaoxiao had heard this joke; one summer she had seen her first coed. Although she didn't take Grandfather's ribbing too seriously, she would nevertheless (whenever she would pass by a pond after he made his crack) absentmindedly hold up her braid by the tip to see how good she would look without a braid, and how she would feel about it.

To gather feed grass for the pigs, Xiaoxiao would take her husband up on the dark slope of Snail Mountain.

The child did not know any better, and so whenever he heard singing, he would break into song. And no sooner did he open his mouth than Motley would appear.

Motley began to harbor new thoughts about Xiaoxiao, which she gradually became aware of and that made her nervous. But Motley was a man, with all the wiles and the ways of a man, strong of build, and nimble-footed, who could divert and charm a girl. While he ingratiated himself with Xiaoxiao's husband, he found ways of sidling up to Xiaoxiao and of disarming her suspicions about him.

But what is a man compared to a mountain? With trees everywhere, Xiaoxiao would be hard to locate. So whenever he wanted to find Xiaoxiao, Motley would stand on a rise and sing in order to get a response from Little Husband at Xiaoxiao's side. As soon as Little Husband sang, Motley, after running over hill and dale, would appear face-to-face before Xiaoxiao.

When the little child saw Motley, he felt nothing but delight. He wanted Motley to make insect figures from grass, or to carve out a flute for him from bamboo, but Motley always came up with a way to send him off to find the necessary materials so that he could sit by Xiaoxiao and sing for her those songs that would bring her guard down and produce a blush on her cheeks. At times, she was worried that something might happen, and she wouldn't let her husband go off; at other times it seemed better to send the boy-husband off, so that he wouldn't see what Motley was up to. Finally, one day, she let Motley sing his way into her heart, and he made a woman of her.

At the time, Little Husband had run down the mountain to pick berries, and Motley sang many songs which he performed for Xiaoxiao:



Pretty maid, an uphill path leads to your door;
If others have walked a little, I've walked more.
My well-made sandals are worn out, walked to shreds;
If not for you, my pretty, then who for?

When he finished, he said to Xiaoxiao: "I haven't slept a wink because of you." He swore up and down that he would tell no one. When she heard this, Xiaoxiao was bewildered: she couldn't help looking at his brawny arms, and she couldn't help hearing the last thing he said. Even when he went to the outhouse, he would sing for her. She was disconcerted. But she asked him to swear before Heaven, and after he swore—which seemed a good enough guarantee—she abandoned herself to him. When Little Husband came back, his hand had been stung by a furry insect, and it was swelling up: he ran to Xiaoxiao. She pinched his hand, blew on the sting, and sucked on it to reduce the swelling. She remembered her thoughtless behavior of a moment ago, and she was dimly aware that she had done something not quite right.

When Motley took her, it was May, when the wheat was brown; by July, the plums had ripened—how fond she was of plums! She felt a change in her body, so when she bumped into Motley on the mountain, she told him about her situation, and asked what she should do.

They talked and talked, but Motley had not the faintest idea of what to do. Although he had sworn before the very heavens, he still had no idea. He was, after all, big in physique but small in courage. A big physique gets you into trouble easily, but small courage puts you at a loss as to how to work your way out.

After a while, Xiaoxiao would finger her snakelike black braid, and, thinking of life in the city, she said:

"Brother Motley, why don't we go where we can be free in the city and find work there? What do you say?"

"That won't do. There's nothing for us there."

"My stomach is getting bigger. That won't do either."

"Let's find some medicine: there's a doctor who sells the stuff in the market."

"You'd better find something quick. I think—"

"It's no use running to 'freedom' in the city. Only strangers there. There are rules even for begging your bread; you can't go about it as you please."

"You're really worthless, and you've been awful to me. Oh, I wish I were dead."

"I swore never to betray you."

"Who cares about betrayal; what I need is your help. Take this living thing out of my belly right away! I'm frightened."

Motley said no more, and after a little while he left. In time, Little Husband came by from a spot where he was gathering red fruit. When he saw Xiaoxiao sitting all alone in the grass, her eyes red from crying, Little Husband began to wonder. After a while he asked:

"Sis, what's the matter?"

"It's nothing. I've got a cobweb in my eye. It smarts."

"Let me blow it away."

"No, don't bother."

"Hey, look at what I've got."

He took out of his pocket little shells and pebbles he had snatched from the nearby brook. Xiaoxiao looked at them, her eyes brimming, and managed a laugh: "Sonny, we get along so well. Please don't tell anyone else I've been crying. They might get upset." And indeed, no one in the family got wind of it.

Half a month went by, and Motley, taking all his belongings with him, left without so much as a word. Grandfather asked Mumbles (who roomed with Motley) whether he knew why Motley had left. Had he merely drifted off into the hills, or had he enlisted in the army? Mumbles shook his head and said that Motley still owed him two hundred dollars; he had gone with not so much as a note when he left. He was certainly a no-good. Mumbles spoke his mind, but gave no indication where Motley might have gone. So the whole family buzzed about it the whole day, talking about this departure until nightfall. But, after all, the farmhand had not stolen anything and had not absconded with anything; so after a while, everyone forgot all about him.

Xiaoxiao, however, was no better off. It would have been nice if she could have forgotten Motley, but her stomach kept on getting bigger and bigger, and something inside began to move. She felt a sense of panic, and she spent one restless night after another.

She became more and more irritable; only her husband was aware of that, because she was now always harsher on him.

Of course, her husband was at her side all the time. She wasn't even very sure what she was thinking herself. On occasion she thought to herself: what if I were to die? Then everything would be all right. But then, why should I have to die? She wanted to enjoy life, to live on.

Whenever anyone in the family mentioned—even in passing—her husband, or babies, or Motley, she felt as if a blow had struck her hard on the chest.

Around October she was worried that more and more people would know. One day, she took her husband to a temple, and, making private vows, she swallowed a mouthful of incense-ashes. But as she was swallowing, her husband saw her and asked what she was doing. She told him this was good for a bellyache. Of course she had to lie. Though she implored the Bodhisattvas to help her, the Bodhisattvas did not see it her way; the child in her grew and grew just as before.

She went out of her way to drink cold water from the stream, and when her husband asked her about it, she said that she was merely thirsty.

Everything she could think of she tried, but nothing could divest her of the awful burden which she carried within. Only her husband knew about her swelling stomach; he did not dare let on to his mother and father. Because of



the disparity in their ages and their years together, her husband regarded her with love mixed with fear, deeper even than his feeling for his own parents.

She remember the oath that Motley swore, as well as what happened besides. It was now autumn, and the caterpillars were changing into chrysalises of various kinds and colors all around the house. Her husband, as if deliberately taunting her, would bring up the incident when he had been stung by the furry insect—that brought up unpleasant memories. Ever since that day, she had hated caterpillars, and whenever she saw one she had to step on it.

One day, word spread that the coeds were back again. When Xiaoxiao heard this, her eyes stared out unseeing, as if in a daze, her gaze fixed on the eastern horizon for some time.

She thought, well, Motley ran away, I can run away too. So she collected a few things, bent on joining the coeds on their way to the big city in search of freedom. But before she could make her move, she was discovered. To the people of the farm this was a grave offense, and so they tied her hands, put her away in a shed, and gave her nothing to eat for a whole day.

When they looked into the causes for her thwarted attempt at escape, they realized that Xiaoxiao, who in ten years was to bear a son for her husband to continue the family line, now carried a child conceived with another. This produced a scandal that shook the household, and the peace and tranquillity in the compound were totally disrupted. There were angry outbursts, there were tears, there were scoldings: each one had his own complaint to make. Hanging, drowning, swallowing poison, all these the long-suffering Xiaoxiao had considered desultorily, but in the end she was too young and still wanted to hold on to life, and so she did nothing. When Grandfather realized the way things were, he hit upon a shrewd plan. He had Xiaoxiao locked up in a room with two people to stand guard; he would call in her family to ask them whether they would recommend that she be drowned, or that she be sold. If it was a matter of saving face, they would recommend drowning; if they couldn't bear to let her die, they would sell her. But Xiaoxiao had only the uncle, who worked on a nearby farm. When he was called, he thought at first he was being invited to a party; only afterward did he realize that the honor of the family was at stake, and this put the honest and well-intentioned fellow at a loss as to what to do.

With Xiaoxiao's belly as proof, there was nothing anyone could say. By rights, she should have been drowned, but only heads of families who have read their Confucius would do such a stupid thing to save the family's honor. This uncle, however, hadn't read Confucius; he couldn't bear to sacrifice Xiaoxiao, and so he chose the alternative of marrying her off to someone else.

This also seemed a punishment, and a natural one at that. It was normal for the husband's family to be considered the injured party, and restitution was to be made from the proceeds of the second marriage. The uncle explained all this carefully to Xiaoxiao, and then was just about to go. Xiaoxiao clung to his robe and would not let him leave, sobbing quietly. The uncle just shook his head, and, without saying a word, left.

At the time, no reputable family wanted Xiaoxiao; if she was to be sent away, someone would have to claim her, and so for the moment she continued to stay at the home of her husband. Once this matter had been settled, no one, as a rule, made any more fuss about it. There was nothing to do but wait, and everyone was totally at ease about the matter. At first, Little Husband was not allowed in Xiaoxiao's company, but after a while they saw each other as before, laughing and playing like brother and sister.

Little Husband understood that Xiaoxiao was pregnant; he also understood that, in her condition, Xiaoxiao should be married off to someone living far away. But he didn't want Xiaoxiao to be sent away, and Xiaoxiao for her part didn't want to go either. Everyone was in a quandary as to what to do, though the force of custom and circumstance dictated what had to be done, and there were no two ways about it. Lately, if one asked who was making up the rules and the customs, whether the patriarch or matriarch, no one could rightly say.

They waited for a prospective husband: November came with still no one in sight. It was decided that Xiaoxiao might as well stay on for the New Year.

In the second month of the new year, she came to term, and gave birth to a son, big-eyed, with a large round head, a sturdy build, and a lusty voice. Everyone took good care of both mother and son; the customary steamed chicken and rice wine were served to the new mother to build up her strength, and ritual paper money was burned to propitiate the gods. Everyone took to the baby boy.

Now that it turned out that the child was a boy, Xiaoxiao didn't have to be married off after all.

When, years later, the wedding ceremony for Xiaoxiao and her husband took place, her son was already ten years old. He could do half a man's work, he could look after the cows and cut the grass—a regular farmhand who could help with the chores. He took to calling Xiaoxiao's husband Uncle: Uncle would answer, with never a cross word.

The son was called "Herdboy." At the age of eleven, he was betrothed to a girl six years older. Since she was already of age, she could lend a helping hand and be very useful to the family. When the time for the bamboo wedding pipes to be sounded at the front door came, the bride inside the sedan chair sobbed pitiably. The grandfather and the great-grandfather were both beside themselves.

On this day, Xiaoxiao had lately given birth (the child was already three months old), and when she carried her newborn babe, watching the commotion and the festivities by the fence under the elm, she was taken back ten years, when she was carrying her husband. Now her own baby was fussing, so she sang in low tones, trying to soothe him:

"Now, there, there, look! The pretty wedding-sedan is coming this way. Look at the bride's lovely gown! How beautiful she looks! Hush! Hush! Don't act up now. Behave yourself or Mommy will get angry. Look, look! The coeds are here too! One day, when you grow up, we'll get you a coed for a wife."

1929

## *Ling Shuhua (1904–1990)*

### THE NIGHT OF MIDAUTUMN FESTIVAL

*Translated by Nathan K. Mao*

On the night of the Midautumn Festival, the moon had just risen gracefully above the rooftops; in the clear sky no trace of a cloud could be seen. The roofs and the courtyards seemed to be sheeted in hoarfrost, and the trees and the shrubbery, far and near, covered with thin sleet. From time to time the smoke of incense swirled and the scent of fruits and delicacies emanated from the reception room.

Jingren had just paid his respects to his ancestors.[1] Still wearing an outer jacket and a skull cap,[2] he paced the reception room and smilingly watched his wife put away articles of worship as she gave orders to the cook: "Later, when you serve dinner, no need to heat the fish again; add some cooking wine to the chestnut chicken and stew it again; also add some sugar to the vegetable dish and stew it some more. The 'Together Duck' is a little tough. Simmer it some more."

"That's right, simmer the 'Together Duck' some more. Could we also add some slices of bamboo shoots to it?" Jingren asked his wife, walking up to her. From his beaming face he was quite pleased with her arrangements.

"All right, add some bamboo shoots; fish out the ham bones; make sure the soup doesn't get too greasy."

1. Presumably before a small wooden tablet inscribed with ancestors' names.
2. Traditional Chinese costume worn on formal occasions. The jacket has wide sleeves.