

Shen Congwen

Selected Stories of Shen Congwen

Trans. Jeffrey Kinkley

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Reviewed by Jiwei Xiao

The publication of *Selected Stories of Shen Congwen*, which collects six translated stories of Shen Congwen (1902–1988), is a welcome addition to the English resource on this important Chinese writer. With almost all his literary works written between the 1920s and 1940s, Shen was most famous for his local-colored stories about his hometown of West Hunan. The region's distinctive ethnographic landscape, religious rituals, sexual customs, and moral ethos as well as legends and everyday life of local people make their way to volumes of his stories in the form of folkloric tales, short stories, novels, and travelogues. Telling stories often in a restrained and understated manner, Shen shows his extraordinary talent to deliver lyricism as well as social criticism without submitting to ideological biases. Shen's aesthetic subtlety, humanist compassion, and apolitical standpoint went unappreciated for a long time. After decades of his self-imposed withdrawal from creative writing and the official ban on his works during the Mao era, Shen was almost totally forgotten in mainland China. He was reintroduced to the modern Chinese literary canon in the 1980s as his works were republished and reevaluated. Shen is now recognized and revered as one of the founding figures who wrote the best modern Chinese "literature of home and country" (*xiangtu wenxue*).

The book, in its English-Chinese bilingual edition, is one of the Bilingual Series on Modern Chinese Literature published by the Hong Kong-based Chinese University Press. It should also be counted as another accomplishment of the translator and scholar Jeffrey Kinkley, whose decade-long devotion to a close study of Shen has produced the landmark literary biography *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*. Kinkley is also the editor and major translator of *Imperfect Paradise*, a book featuring twenty-four translated stories of Shen and so far the best and the most extensive collection of Shen's works in English. Compared to *Imperfect Paradise*, *Selected Stories of Shen Congwen* has a less ambitious scale and a more coherent theme—in Kinkley's words, "the contradiction and reversals in Shen Congwen's portraits of 'paradise,' even in his depiction of 'corruption'" (xxii).

The titular heroine of the story "Sansan" is one of Shen's many prepubescent female characters whose threatened innocence is portrayed as psychologically realistic as it is allegorically meaningful in the larger context of social modernization. The male characters in "Husband" and "Quisheng" appear first as ordinary peasants content with their lives but are both later awakened to their inferior status in a society whose class oppression is coded in sexual possession and deprivation. Kinkley also shows his superb knowledge and understanding

of Shen Congwen's "critical lyricism" by placing "The New and the Old," a story that has invited little attention from other critics so far, on top as the first story of the collection. "The New and the Old" tells the story about an old soldier called Warrior Yang who finds himself caught in a nightmarish experience of being unable to tell reality from dream when he is carrying out his job as an executioner for one last time. Having spent the larger part of his life as an executioner beheading prisoners, Warrior Yang earns a name for his excellent dispatching skills. But it seems that in his old age and in the "new" time, his skills are rendered obsolete by the use of guns and bullets. Just as he eases into a nonviolent quiet life as a gatekeeper, his life takes a drastic turn when one day he receives the order to behead two prisoners in public. The irony is that while the rifle allows the government to kill people with far more ease, it lacks the intimidating power of the ritualistic gruesomeness of beheading with a sword. Although Warrior Yang successfully executes his job, he has felt, throughout the event, being estranged from the reality. When he runs into the temple of the city god and crawls under the altar to ask for forgiveness after the execution, as was the custom and as he did every time in the past, everyone takes him as a madman.

Warrior Yang is vaguely aware of the fact that, while his technique is needed, the old customs have long since been discarded and forgotten. What he is not so clear about is the contrast between "the Old" and "the New"—no matter how meaningless to the point of being farcical it looks, the old ritual of the executioner's praying for forgiveness and the ensuing "performance" of trial and punishment of him in the court at least carries a recognition that depriving another man of his life is a crime. Warrior Yang's "madness" and later death therefore announces a total alienation of modern man from tradition and from his humanity. Here, rather than criticizing the stupor and barbarity of the executioner, the writer instead goes to great lengths to delineate the inner world of the man, his uncanny feelings, his bewilderment, as he gropes for sanity in the wildness of time. But if the reader is riveted and moved by the inner chaos of this "last executioner," Shen's depiction of the man's "exteriority" has a similar effect of humanizing the otherwise cruel figure. Those seemingly insignificant everyday details about Warrior Yang's simple and idle life as a gatekeeper before the incident—the faded bloodstain on the old soldier's sword, his lethargic basking in the sun, his friendliness with other soldiers and children—allow humanity to shine through in the most unlikely places.