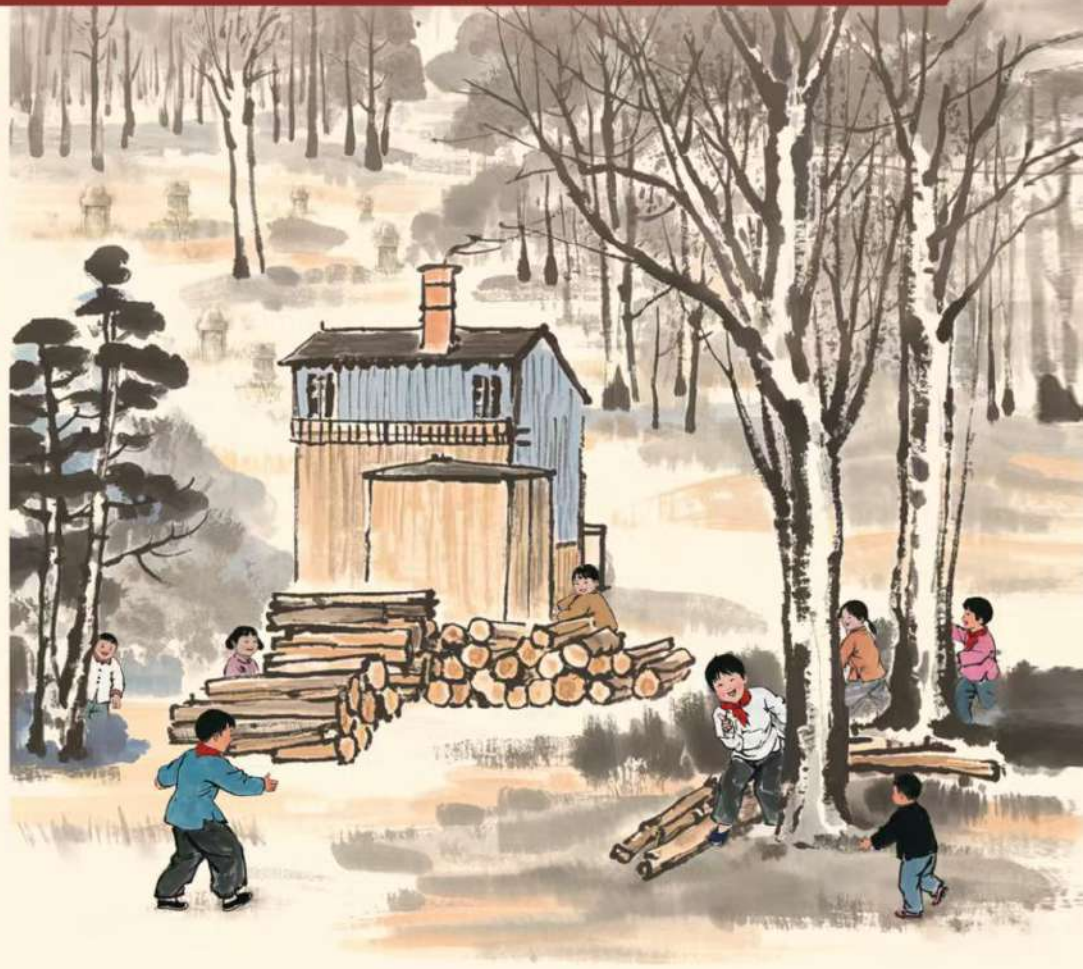
The End of the Game and Other Stories

By Xie Hong

Translated from the Chinese by Sun Jicheng and Hal Swindall



The End of the Game and Other Stories

Translated from the Chinese by Sun Jicheng and Hal Swindall

The End of the Game and Other Stories

by Xie Hong, translated from the Chinese by Sun Jicheng and Hal Swindall

Most of these stories have already appeared individually in journals like *Renditions*. Xie Hong is a unique voice among contemporary Chinese fiction writers, which is why he has won several literary prizes in his home country. These stories are funny-sad depictions of the quandaries and ironies of ordinary Chinese in Shenzhen as they struggle to cope with what the Chinese writer Ning Ken has called the "ultra-unreal" reality of China in the late twentieth century. Indeed, Ning Ken is a friend of Xie Hong, who says this expression captures what he attempts to portray in his stories. In this respect, he might be described as similar to the older writer Mo Yan, who was cited by the Noble committee for his "hallucinatory realism" in depicting contemporary China. The collection totals eight stories, a translators' preface, and an interview with Xie Hong as an appendix.

ISBN 978-1-7394206-3-5

9 781739 420635 >

LEOMAN PUBLISHING COMPANY LIMITED
1 DOCK ROAD LONDON ENGLAND E16 1AH

The End of the Game and Other Stories

By Xie Hong

ISBN: 978-1-7394206-3-5

Publisher: LEOMAN PUBLISHING CO., LTD.

UNIT G25 WATERFRONT STUDIOS

1 DOCK ROAD

LONDON ENGLAND

E16 1AH

Institutional Subscribers: £8.00 per single copy, postage not included.

Private Subscribers: All are entitled to a reduced rate, with students to an extra reduction.

Contents

Translators' Note 1

Ultra-Unreality and Comic Vision in the Fiction of Xie Hong

The End of the Game 9

Who Flies in April? 19

Drifters 29

Fracture 61

A Romance 79

Am I Very Important? 99

Rainy Night Robbery 123

Like a Migratory Bird 139

Appendix 183

Writing between Two Languages: An Interview with Chinese Novelist Xie Hong

About the Author 193

About the Translators 194

Acknowledgments 196

Translators' Note

Ultra-Unreality and Comic Vision in the Fiction of Xie Hong

By Sun Jicheng and Hal Swindall

Xie Hong is a writer based in the Chinese town of Shenzhen, just inside the mainland north of Hong Kong. He was until 2015 practically unknown in the West, but he has won multiple awards in his native country. We are engaged in translating a selection of his short stories into English because we believe they are relevant to understanding China's recent past and present, besides being literary gems in themselves. What is more, Xie's English debut, *Mao's Town*, the first volume of a novella trilogy, appeared in April 2018 from the Danish publisher Whyte Tracks. Overall, we believe Xie's writing provides a window into what his friend and fellow Chinese writer Ning Ken has called the "ultra-unreal" of Chinese society today, with its rampant corruption, pollution, and confusion that no fiction writer can keep up with. Nevertheless, Xie's stories offer hope to his fellow Chinese, and he wishes maybe people everywhere. In this respect, he is broadly similar to other contemporary Chinese writers, but he conveys a unique comic vision within the tumult of China at the turn of this century.

Born in a small Guangdong Province town in 1966 to an accountant and a housewife, Xie's childhood home was just a brick-and-earth bungalow. He claims his childhood during the Cultural Revolution left him "sensitive and depressive," as well as introverted, and that this shows in his writing. In 1981, Xie's father moved the family to Shenzhen, which was then a boomtown full of other migrants trying to get rich. Here, Xie knew economic rather than political anxiety as his

father cracked under pressure and became an alcoholic, forcing his wife to support the family with any part-time work she could find. Xie claims this kind of strain affects his writing, too. Despite such hardship, he was able to attend Shenzhen High School, the city's most prestigious secondary education institution, many of whose alumni have gone on to distinction, and to earn a B.A. in economics at Shanghai's East China Normal University. Afterward, he returned to his hometown for a career in the Bank of China.

It was during his undergraduate days that Xie began his literary output, pouring himself into student literary magazines and earning a poetic reputation around campus. He says these were the happiest days of his life, although none of his later writing is set in Shanghai. In 1990, he met a fellow student who became his ex-wife, Xia Muzi. They have no children, and Xie describes their relationship as "mostly like friends." While supporting himself as a banker in Shenzhen for fourteen years after graduation, Xie won literary prizes. To date, his Chinese credits include six novels, three short story collections, and a volume of verse. In 2005, Xie and Muzi made a failed attempt to emigrate to New Zealand. The experience was nonetheless educational for Xie, at least giving him new material to write about and improving his English. Now, he lives in Shenzhen permanently, while Muzi still spends much of her time in New Zealand running their cleaning business.

Xie began composing short stories in 1994, after a decade as a poet. He made this switch in response to the immense changes going on around him, deciding that fiction was a better medium to express himself, and that short fiction was easier than novels, which he had no experience writing. Moreover, he believed

that overly poetic language would damage the "exactness" and "accuracy" required for portraying contemporary China in all its anomalies. We, therefore, divide Xie's development as a short story writer over the past twenty-five years into the "practice stage," the "personal style stage," and the "mature stage." Nevertheless, Xie's stories from all of these stages share common themes, chiefly his struggle to depict the richness and strangeness of life in the fast-paced city of Shenzhen. In this respect, he has much in common with the older writer Mo Yan, who was cited by the Nobel committee for his "hallucinatory realism," although Mo sets his fiction in the Shandong Province countryside and has not tried living abroad.

Xie's debut story was "The End of the Game," published in 1995 and translated by us for *World Literature Today's* May 2015 issue. Set in a small town and narrated by an anonymous boy, the plot centers around a sawmill where the local children play forbidden games of hide and seek at night. Many townsfolk believe the sawmill to be haunted because it is constructed on the site of an old cemetery; it is also a source of noise pollution. The conversion of a sacred place of rest into one of industry could be a metaphor for China's rapid economic development, woven into which is the theme of children's games in defiance of parental interdiction continuing in the new era. Although the ending is macabre, this story is an unmistakably comic one, like most of Xie's others.

"The End of the Game" was a strong beginning, but early on, Xie was writing out of his intuition and still being relatively poetic. From around 2000, he began to consciously cultivate a more objective prose style and techniques, as well as to explore the inner worlds of his characters, all urban dwellers, like those of most other contemporary Chinese writers. An example we

have translated is "Who Flies in April?" which was published in Renditions magazine's autumn 2018 issue. This third-person narrative is about a teenage girl named Summer who comes from southern China to Beijing to attend the political rehabilitation memorial service of her late grandfather. The action mainly takes place in Summer's mind as she waits through the service, then visits her insane aunt, all the while reflecting on what she heard during her own troubled girlhood of her grandfather's tribulations as a Mao-era dissident as she coughs on the springtime willow fluff. Xie's use of aerial irritants as a metaphor for his characters' inescapable pasts, with only death or madness setting them free, suggests how family and political ties continue to bind, yet also implies that some kind of freedom is still possible.

Besides the political themes of the later story, there is little difference between "The End of the Game" and "Who Flies in April?" since both are sadly comic and are set in late twentieth-century China. However, the second tale is sadder because Xie's personal style stage was more serious than in his practice stage; at this later time, he had become preoccupied with the conflict between people and their environments, although that is apparent in his earlier story. Xie changed yet again upon perfecting his story-writing talents, entering his mature stage around 2007. An example of this stage is "Fracture," another funny-sad tale in which the first-person narrator, a young Shenzhen businessman, falls in love with a woman he cannot marry, so he settles for a woman he is not in love with. On his way to visit the woman he loves, a piece of steel sticking up from the pavement trips him, and he fractures his wrist. After much ado, he becomes reconciled to his wife and career

situation, but the painful twinge in his healed wrist whenever he washes his hands always brings back the memory--the story's title refers to fractures of multiple kinds, especially between people's inner lives and their surroundings.

"Fracture" is really a romantic comedy, connecting it to our third and still-unpublished co-translation, "A Romance," which comes from Xie's practice stage, having been composed in 1995. Both stories have first-person male protagonists who cause injury pursuing romantic attractions that they fail to consummate, and both ultimately represent a comic vision despite their sad environments. Above all, both portray romantic interest and its hazards in contemporary China. Additionally, both are composed in Xie's signature minimalist style, with no physical descriptions of characters or their settings. Xie claims his sparse sentence style is similar to Hemingway's, the Western writer he most admires, and it is a factor setting him apart from other Chinese writers today.

"A Romance" is also similar to the more overtly comic later tale in that it narrates a potentially tragic situation for both the narrator and the woman who attracts him. Set in 1990s Shenzhen, it opens with the narrator, Little Chen, seeing an intriguing woman riding ahead of him as he pedals to work; trying to pedal closer to her, his front tire accidentally bumped by hers, causing a crash. Now, the shy Little Chen sees her face, for she is the only character in the whole story whose features are described, and he finds she is pretty. Later, we learn her name is Little Zhang. Little Chen is flustered by her beauty, on top of his fear that he will be in trouble if he has injured her, so he does the right thing by escorting her to her work unit. That night, he goes to the theatre with the two tickets he always buys; we infer this is in the hope

of finding a date. On this particular night, he hopes, of course, to meet Little Zhang. She does not come, so then he returns to his own apartment, where he hopes to receive her phone call. The story's climax comes when his ex-girlfriend phones, saying she has two theatre tickets; alas, Little Chen cannot communicate with her over the bad connection.

Xie believes his theme of failed romantic attraction continuing even in grim surroundings makes his stories more meaningful in the contemporary Chinese context, and his desire that we translate them into English to explain contemporary China to the rest of the world dovetails with his debut as an English-language novelist, which is another factor setting him apart from most of his fellow Chinese writers. With *Mao's Town*, however, Xie has begun a historical trilogy commencing in the Cultural Revolution; it is, therefore, much grimmer than his romantic comedies, although a strain of humor runs through it. As with "The End of the Game," *Mao's Town* is narrated from the perspective of a small boy, although the novel's framing device is that of him as a man reminiscing in America about the horrors of the Cultural Revolution with a woman who was his childhood friend.

The boy is friends with a couple named Jing and Ahn, two Indonesian Chinese who have returned to China to work for its development under Mao; this proves a fatal error that becomes the climax of the story. Jing is a skilled tailor who makes beautiful clothes that contrast with the uniformity of Mao-era Chinese dress, while her husband is an English teacher--a dangerous job at that place and time. Predictably, Jing and Ahn are denounced as enemies of the people, much to the dismay of the boy narrator, who admires Jing's tailoring talents and enjoys going fishing with

Ahn. After public beatings and humiliation, Jing and Ahn both commit suicide while being paraded through the village: she jumps into a household steel furnace, and he jumps off a bridge that the Red Guards are marching him over.

As Dr. Tang Qiyun, a Chinese critic who has followed Xie's career, points out in his review of *Mao's Town*, if Jean-Paul Sartre believed that all the world's literature is "writing for freedom," then we can also regard Xie Hong's stories as writing "for human dignity." In fact, human freedom and dignity could be seen as part of the meaning of any literary work. Without freedom, where does dignity come from, and vice-versa? Xie's fiction tells us that life and human events can be absurd but also that those of us living, in reality, should not lose our dignity as human beings. Here is the point where Xie departs from other contemporary Chinese writers, who are more concerned with portraying the "ultra-unreal reality" that surrounded them as they grew up circa 1990. Across his total output, which is greater than theirs, Xie reveals a path to survival in the chaos of contemporary Chinese life, despite its disappointments and frustrations, such as Summer's inability to come to a conclusion about her grandfather or Little Chen's inability to consummate his romance with Little Zhang. These early attempts of his can be seen, in retrospect, to have built up into his English novella *Mao's Town*, which describes horrific events but also the preservation of human dignity and inner freedom, even in, or through death.

Xie Hong differs from other Chinese writers in other ways, too. First of all, his personal growth experience was quite different. Although others were also born in small towns, they moved to major cities where they witnessed the development of the modern metropolis; Xie has moved around the country a

bit more, for instance, in his undergraduate work in Shanghai. More significantly, he moved to New Zealand, where he had an overseas life and education experience, which few other Chinese writers have had. Even as a boy growing up in Shenzhen, Xie could tune in to Hong Kong radio programs from just over the border, which excited him with their news of a different world. He claims that due to his unusual development, the values he presents in his works are closer to universal values than strictly Chinese ones, although, like all the other Chinese writers today, he possesses a concern for depicting his country to the West.

From the perspective of writing itself, Xie uses both Chinese and English to think and write, giving his works an international perspective, unlike most of his peers. In this respect, he continues the tradition of writing and publishing works in English pioneered by a few former writers, such as Lao She and Lin Yutang. Although some other Chinese writers now have overseas experience, they still only publish in Chinese. One Chinese writer who exclusively writes in English is Ha Jin, but he is a Chinese American whose default language is English, while Xie actively chooses to write in English while residing on the mainland. Henceforth, he plans to mainly write in English as both a practical and aesthetic choice.

At this point, no one can tell whether Xie will become a popular author with Anglophone readers, which he sincerely wishes to do. However, it can be said that he is quite a unique voice among Chinese writers, deserving attention for his depiction of China's "ultra-unreal."

(Reprinted by permission from ***The London Magazine***, issue June-July 2019)