

Xu Xu, *Bird Talk and Other Stories by Xu Xu: Modern Tales of a Chinese Romantic*.

Translated with a commentary by Frederik H. Green. Berkeley: Stonebridge Press, 2020. 223 pages, ISBN: 978-1611720556.

From his first literary hit in the late 1930s until today, Xu Xu 徐訏 [1908–1980] has been charming the Chinese reading public with his literate and well-crafted stories. The publication of *Bird Talk and Other Stories by Xu Xu* is sure to bring new admirers into the fold.

To create his pen name, Xu Xu took the first and last characters of his full given name. He was born Xu Boyu (徐伯訏, the final character can be pronounced either Yu or Xu) in the coastal city of Cixi 慈溪, Zhejiang province. The city is 73 miles (118 km) south of Shanghai and 40 miles (60 km) north of the city of Ningbo. Although Xu Xu studied in Beijing from 1927 to 1931 and graduated from Peking University, he was temperamentally drawn to the lush and humid climate of his hometown along the coast of south China. The climate was different in the south where the weather brought swirling clouds, rains and mists. He began his literary career in Shanghai in 1933 under the guidance and encouragement of Lin Yutang 林語堂 [1895–1976] whose interpretive writings in English explaining Chinese traditional values and perspectives have made him well-known to English-speaking audiences. Xu Xu spent most of his literary life in Shanghai and Hong Kong where the frigid winds and prolonged dryness of north China was far away.

Xu Xu's stories often appear autobiographical because the persona of the narrators he depicts in his tales appears to reflect the author himself. In many of the stories he is a young to early middle-aged Chinese man, of an even temper, well-educated, and always thoughtful. He observes the lives around him from a somewhat removed perspective, not much given to extreme swings of emotions and reacting only mildly to the vicissitudes of what life brings to him. He tends to behave like a gentleman acting responsibly in an adult manner, still a member of the gentry family into which the author Xu Xu was born.

In many of the stories published in this book, what pulled the narrator into daily life and provided the plots for his stories was his attraction to some young woman. The women were always younger than he was. In the case of this collection's title story "Bird Talk" [*Niaoyu* 鳥語] he is drawn to a girl who is seventeen while the narrator is already the editor of a literary magazine with a wife in Shanghai. The girl is called a "dimwit" by the people of the village where the narrator is taking a rest away from his busy life in Shanghai. The girl likes to communicate with the birds that fly among the bushes and trees in the garden of the house where he is staying. She makes chirping sounds to them, and they respond by sometimes staying nearby and not being startled by her sounds.

As the narrator gets to know the girl, he finds that she is awkward and ill at ease among the normal people of the village and appears removed from the daily activities around her. He notices her “naked white shins ... stuck in a pair of black cotton shoes that were damp from the dew on the grass.” As he gradually gets to know her and they hold short conversations, he finds she is especially sensitive to the way the birds go about their routines, near to and yet removed from the mundane lives of the humans in the village. He also finds that she is drawn to the poetry and Buddhist scriptures that he introduces into their talks. She does not seem a dimwit, but rather deeply in touch with a more humane and lyrical aspect of living things.

The two grow emotionally close and he asks to have the girl move with him back to Shanghai to live with his family and his other relatives there. Once back in the cosmopolitan city, the narrator falls again into his demanding work with the literary journal where he is editor, with its constant meetings and rounds of evening meals and drinking to entertain writers, intellectuals, and other professionals. The girl's quiet and introspective demeanor begins to stand in sharp contrast to the distracting bustle and worldly social pursuits that take away his time and energy. His family and relatives grow to disdain the girl, who quietly withdraws into her own mental and emotional world.

The narrator realizes he feels overwhelming love for the girl, and she says she has the same feelings for him. He decides they should both withdraw from the atmosphere of Shanghai, so they travel to Hangzhou where the narrator can find a new job and they can live a more sedate life. He arranges a temporary place for them to stay at a Buddhist nunnery. The quiet days of meditation, chanting the sutras, and helping the poor suddenly reveal to the girl an environment where she feels completely comfortable and accepted. Her new sense of comfort also sharpens her differences with the narrator who, though sensitive and thoughtful, has learned to thrive in the defiled world of material gain.

Xu Xu's story “Ghost Love” [*Guilian* 鬼戀], also in this collection, was published in 1937 and became the piece that brought him celebrity in China. It was first serialized in the popular literary and current affairs journal *Celestial Winds* [*Yuzhou feng* 宇宙風]. He revised it and published it as a book that by 1949 had gone through nineteen print runs. In 1995 filmmaker Chen Yifei 陳逸飛 [1946–2005] produced a remake of the book and titled it *Evening Liaison* [*Renyue huanghun* 人約黃昏]。

China has a long history of tales involving ghosts. Often the ghostly apparitions transformed themselves into alluring young women who were able to bewitch and seduce men. The women were captivating and so “real” in the eyes of the men who were young students preparing to be scholars, that at first there was no way to imagine anything ghostly about the seduction taking

place. This made the eventual denouement all the more unexpected and unbelievable in retrospect. When this story was published, Xu Xu was about to turn thirty, himself a recent university graduate and deeply active in the literary world of magazines and young intellectuals.

The opening scene is set on Nanjing Road, then and now a major commercial street and shopping area in urban Shanghai. On a wintry evening about midnight, he sees a woman dressed all in black standing by a tobacco shop who asks him directions to a street that runs father to the south of the area. He smells the smoke from her cigarette and recognizes it as from a British brand that was then very popular. He says she is as attractive as a goddess, but she replies, "I am not a goddess. I am a ghost." He chuckles and thinks to himself "So one can see ghosts on Nanjing Road now."

The worldly sarcasm and clear statement of the woman might serve to throw out of focus the beginning of a ghost story, but from the opening lines the story deepens into the differences between ghosts and humans. He finds out where she lives, staying in a room in a Western style house on the southern edge of the city. He visits her in the evenings and becomes more enamored of her style and aura of mystery. She keeps telling him he ought to keep his distance because they have no hope of real consummation or of a life together. Once when visiting the well-known Longhua Buddhist Temple [*Longhua si* 龍華寺] in the city with friends, he thinks he sees her dressed in the grey robes of a Buddhist nun, and his recognition apparently gives her pause as she quickly moves away.

The sighting only emboldens the narrator, who decides he wants to see her in the light of day and not only in the gloom of darkness. He determines to find the house he has been visiting at night, but the people living there tell him the upstairs room was not being rented out but has been empty for a long time. The more the reality of the daytime dislodges the mists of the evenings, the more the narrator struggles to comprehend the situation he is in. He faces an emotional attraction very real and strong within himself, but a reality composed of unreal forces.

In the two stories introduced above, Xu Xu communicates his longing for a more stable and orderly past. He felt comfortable in the setting of "traditional" Chinese values and structures. His China of the 1920s and 1930s was changing, but the prevailing attitudes of the time were in harmony with the preceding Qing dynasty [1616–1911]. Attitudes were still set in the past where the vast countryside held somewhat isolated farming villages and where the male-dominated system of regulated family life held virtually total acceptance. Xu Xu's world view holding to this attitude is behind every story in the collection.

However, both “Bird Talk” published in 1950 and “Ghost Love” in 1937 are set in a transforming social and cultural milieu that was already being upended by the time the stories came out. In the late 1930s Japanese troops were taking over China’s cities all along the east coast. In 1950 the end of a civil war in China marked the emergence of the new People’s Republic. The instability of life in China during those decades could not fail to impact Xu Xu as an active intellectual and writer who reacted publicly through his writing and speaking to the storms roiling over his world. He began his literary career in Shanghai but left the city in 1937 because of the Japanese threat and headed inland to where the Chinese government was relocating. In 1950 he once again felt it wise to leave post-war Shanghai because he had been criticized by left-wing writers who said his philosophy was escapist and passive, unlike the clearly defined, activist messages of the Chinese communists who had come to power.

So Xu Xu moved to Hong Kong, an enclave then under British control. There he continued to publish large amounts of fiction, both short stories and novels. His writings regularly appeared in the literary supplements of the *Sing Tao Evening Post* [*Xingdao wanbao* 星島晚報]. He also wrote a great amount of literary criticism, edited several literary journals, taught Chinese literature, and was Chair of the Chinese Department of Hong Kong Baptist University. When his collected writings [*Xu Xu wenji* 徐訏文集] were published in Shanghai in 2008, the set consisted of sixteen volumes.

“When Ah Heung Came to Gousing Road” [*Lai Gaosheng lu de yige nüren* 來高升路的一個女人], another story in this collection, was published in 1965 while Xu Xu was living in Hong Kong. The Chinese language used in this story has been transliterated into Cantonese, widely spoken in that area of southeast China. In this story Xu Xu is no longer the first-person narrator but instead tells the story as a third person observer.

Hong Kong island then was filled with economic migrants, people who had filtered into the relatively stable colonial bastion while the communist government on the mainland was undertaking land reform and moving toward a socialist society. Three men found themselves each setting up a small stall by the side of Gousing Road where the economically secure lived, in high rises lining the road, and interacted daily with the penniless street sellers who were able to survive, but only just. One of the younger men specialized in cutting keys, since the well-to-do in the apartments always had gates and doors to be locked. Another of the younger men sold potted plants and miniature trees, though his dream was to open a small shop to sell light bulbs and repair electrical appliances since he had worked in such a shop back in Canton. The third man was older and always cheerful as he cut leather and made shoes to sell.

They commented on the people who passed by while subsisting in their simple world of daily work.

As is true of the other stories in this volume, a young woman enters the picture and becomes the focus of the narration. Gradually she interacts with the three men and tells them she is poor like they are. She works for a rich lady in one of the high-rise apartments where her mistress lives a life of luxury. The two younger men began to fantasize about their new friend who is so kind and caring and cheerful. Their attempts to court her end when she makes it clear that she has no intention to enter into a marriage that will keep her poor and working hard for the rest of her life.

The story plays out in a fast-paced and light-hearted way and has a happy ending that cheered the readers in Hong Kong. But in this story, as in the others in this collection, Xu Xu gives us the opportunity to pause for thought. Through the plot of the story, he asks readers to consider the ways in which this young lady, in fact all of the women in his stories, have confronted the realities of their lives but with determination pursued their own goals. Xu Xu was an intellectual who gave several layers of meaning to all of his stories.

Readers of this collection will be rewarded both by the five stories presented, as well as by the excellent Introduction and Afterward provided by Frederik H. Green, translator of the stories and a scholar on the life and works of Xu Xu. Green's explanations set the life of Xu Xu in the context of the currents of modern Chinese literature during his lifetime. Xu Xu came to feel that during the twentieth century literature lost its confidence in mankind, as if it were wrestled to the ground by writers with other agendas. He wrote that the literature of the twentieth century was a literature of "doubt" [*huaiyi* 懷疑]. Green compares the literary trends of modern European writers of the twentieth century along with some of those from China's Republican period, displaying for us a picture of the literary atmosphere in which Xu Xu created his works. Green's contributions to this collection give us a primer of Xu Xu, his life and times, and examples of several of his popular stories. This well-conceived volume tells us much about Xu Xu, the times in which he lived, and it is a delight to read.

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