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## Translation Issues in Modern Chinese Literature: Viewpoint, Fate and Metaphor in Xia Shang's "The Finger-Guessing Game"

Jonathan Heinrichs  
*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

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Translation Issues in Modern Chinese Fiction: Viewpoint, Fate and Metaphor in Xia Shang's *The  
Finger-Guessing Game*

A Thesis Presented

by

JONATHAN M. HEINRICHS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment  
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Chinese



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Approved as to style and content by:

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Enhua Zhang, Chair

---

Elena Suet-Ying Chiu, Member

---

David K. Schneider, Member

---

David K. Schneider, Director  
East Asian Languages and Cultures

---

William Moebius, Chair  
Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures

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ABSTRACT

TRANSLATION ISSUES IN MODERN CHINESE FICTION: VIEWPOINT, FATE AND  
METAPHOR IN XIA SHANG'S *THE FINGER GUESSING GAME*

SEPTEMBER 2019

JONATHAN M. HEINRICHS, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT  
M.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Enhua Zhang

*The Finger-Guessing Game* is a novel with many layers of themes, characterization, and metaphor, and conveying all of these varied aspects requires a detailed, careful approach to translation. With this thesis I aim to show that strictly adhering to a singular translation method, such as “word-for-word” or “sense-for-sense,” will produce unsatisfactory results at certain points within the novel. This is accomplished by an overview of several different unique aspects of the writing style of this novel, viewpoint, the theme of fate, and the use of idioms and metaphors. Following this will be an analysis of these aspects’ functions within the novel, and how to best translate them to retain their original meaning. In the end, I advocate for a case-by-case approach to the translation of this novel, wherein each unit of translation is considered individually, and the translator judges how to translate it in the best way possible. Only in this way can the meaning present at all levels in the text, from the themes down to the very language used, be translated in a

manner which both reads naturally in English and still carries as much of the original meaning as possible.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Much to the chagrin of translators, there is no such thing as a perfect translation. The subtleties of language and the deep cultural connotations embedded in each and every word make it impossible to truly convey one hundred percent of the meaning of a phrase or word in one language when translated into another. This becomes particularly difficult when working with languages as wildly different as Chinese and English. Without many of the same cultural touchstones that English shares with other European languages, translating idioms and metaphors presents challenges that can only be overcome by the creativity and ingenuity of the translator. In addition, the different literary traditions of these two languages lend themselves to modes of expression that are quite distinct from each other. Thus, translators are forced to make hard decisions not only about what words to use in their translations, but also what literary style in the target language best represents that of the source language.

With this in mind, translating Xia Shang's 《猜拳游戏》 (*The Finger-Guessing Game*) presents many challenges both unique and familiar. On its surface, *The Finger-Guessing Game* is a relatively simple story: a man is arrested on suspicion of having solicited a prostitute while his wife and her former lover deal with the fallout that this creates. Taken at face value this story should not be overly difficult to translate. However, there are layers of meaning and subtleties of expression that make this novel transcend its deceptively simple structure and complicate the translation process greatly.

*The Finger-Guessing Game* follows the lives of three characters, Xiao Ke, Xia Shang, and Cong Rong, over the course of several days. At the beginning of the novel Xiao Ke is arrested on suspicion of soliciting a prostitute, a charge that he denies. His friend, Xia Shang, and

his pregnant wife, Cong Rong, each deal with this news in their own ways. Cong Rong for her part feels hurt and betrayed by her husband, and spends most of the novel wrestling with a decision that is concealed from the readers. As Cong Rong's former lover, Xia Shang is torn between the feelings that he still has for her and the knowledge that their lives have moved on to the point that they can never be together again. Meanwhile, Xiao Ke and his fellow inmates, who are all turned in by the same prostitute yet plead their innocence, engage in a game that is meant to determine who among them is actually guilty. Paradoxically, whichever of them is determined to be guilty by the game is subsequently released from prison. In the end, Xiao Ke and one other prisoner are the last to be released, and it turns out that the decision that Cong Rong has been struggling with is whether or not to have an abortion, which she decides to do.

While the actual events of the story are straightforward, the way in which they are related and their significance are not. In order to produce an accurate translation that is faithful to the source material, there are three major areas that the translator must focus on.

The first is the matter of perspective. The story alternates between sections that are told from Xia Shang's first-person perspective and sections that are told from Xiao Ke's third person perspective. This creates a question in readers' minds: since Xia Shang is the first-person narrator, are the sections told from Xiao Ke's third person perspective meant to be an accurate retelling of events, or are they a product of Xia Shang's imagination? In addition, since Xia Shang is the name of both the writer and the character, should this change the way that readers interpret the character and the way he perceives events? When added to the scattered timeline of the novel, in which numerous flashbacks are inserted here and there, it is clear that the way the story is told is specifically calculated to bring about a desired effect, which will be discussed further in Chapter 2. Thus, it is of paramount importance that the translation preserves all of

these features in order to allow readers who do not speak Chinese to experience the novel as it was originally intended.

Another translation issue is the role of fate in the novel. As one of the main themes in the novel, this idea needs to be carefully translated so that readers of the translation can understand this idea as fully as readers of the Chinese original. Specifically, the way that fate and expectation contrast in this novel is very particular, and has great implications for the thematic importance of the story, which will be discussed further in Chapter 3. In order for readers of the translation to understand this theme, and in order for them to be able to come to their own conclusions about the role of fate in the novel, it is very important that it be translated in such a way as to preserve all of the meanings and implications of the original.

On a more technical level, the novel uses numerous Chinese four-character expressions and idioms with layers of meaning and cultural significance. Although many idioms have a direct English equivalent, there are also many that do not. Translating these can be tricky, as it is very important to capture the spirit of the phrase, but it is also desirable to maintain as much of the cultural significance present in the idiom's literal meaning as possible. No matter how you translate these idioms something is going to be lost, so it is up to the translator to determine what is most important to keep. This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

With so many disparate theories on how best to translate, it can be difficult for a translator to know where to begin. Basically, translation theories fall into one of two camps: word-for-word translation or sense-for-sense translation.<sup>1</sup> However, with such specific requirements in terms of how viewpoint should be expressed and how the themes must come

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<sup>1</sup> Blakesley, Jacob S.D. "A Brief Tour of Western Translation Theory." In *Modern Italian Poets: Translators of the Impossible*, 26-53. University of Toronto Press, 2014.

across, strict adherence to any translation theory is bound to be unsatisfactory for some translation issues.

Thus, what this paper aims to show is that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for translation issues in this novel. Instead, each translation item should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and the translation method that best fits the individual problem should be selected. To show this, a literary evaluation of each of the major translation issues will be provided, in order to show the purpose behind these themes and why translating them accurately is so important. After that some representative examples of these translation issues will follow, with evaluations of various ways to translate them, and a final decision about which method is best and why.

## CHAPTER 2

### VIEWPOINT IN “THE FINGER-GUESSING GAME”

There is, perhaps, nothing more important to the way a story is told than perspective. After all, the viewpoint character is the means by which readers experience everything that happens in the story. Thus, translating viewpoint both interestingly and accurately is of paramount importance if one wishes the resulting translation to be faithful to the source material. In most works this is a relatively straightforward task: both English and Chinese, and most languages for that matter, primarily use simple first and third person narrative styles. However, when a work takes a more creative approach to narration, a similarly creative approach to translation becomes necessary.

And the narration in “The Finger-Guessing Game” is certainly atypical. Although for the most part it is told from a first-person perspective, large parts of it are told from an almost omniscient third-person viewpoint. Further complicating this first-third person dichotomy is the fact that the first-person narrator is in fact named after the author himself, Xia Shang. The first-person sections include a lot of flashbacks and lengthy explanations of seemingly irrelevant information, and the third-person sections have an unreal, almost dreamlike quality to them at times.

Therefore, translating these viewpoint changes accurately involves far more than just substituting “I” for “我” and “He” for “他”. In the following chapter, I will discuss the translation challenges involved with each of these aspects of viewpoint, and then talk about the solutions that I used. In Chapter 2.1 I will discuss the back and forth between first- and third-person viewpoint. In Chapter 2.2 I will talk about the use of authorial self-insertion, how much attention should be paid to that, and whether or not it should affect the translation. And in Chapter 2.3 my topic will

be the heavy use of flashbacks in the first-person sections and the surreal tone of the third-person sections, and how these should be understood in the context of how they affect the translation.

## **2.1 First-Person or Third?**

Unlike most stories, where the viewpoint adheres faithfully to either a first-person or a third-person narration, “The Finger-Guessing Game” moves back and forth between the two. Each chapter alternates between the viewpoints of Xia Shang, the first-person narrator who is named after the author, and Xiao Ke, Xia Shang’s friend who is arrested and thrown into a jail cell.

The chapters told from Xia Shang’s perspective, although they include many ponderings and flashbacks, tend to be rather realistic in their depiction of events. By contrast, the chapters told from Xiao Ke’s third-person perspective have many surreal elements in them. This creates tension in the story between reality and illusion, one that is ultimately up to the reader to resolve.

Thus, before figuring out how to translate this ambiguity, it is important to first ascertain what role it plays in the story. The following section will discuss the role of perspectival ambiguity in “The Finger-Guessing Game”, and how to best interpret it. After that will follow a section about how this interpretation can be understood and applied in a translation context.

### **2.1.1 A Matter of Perspective**

There is an interesting variation on traditional first-person narration in “The Finger-Guessing Game.” Most of the story is told from the first-person perspective of the main character,

but many chapters are narrated in the third-person perspective of another character, Xiao Ke. Furthermore, the parts of the story that are narrated by Xiao Ke take place in situations where Xia Shang could not possibly know what was going on, as the two of them never appear in the same place at the same time in the story.

This immediately brings an important question to the reader's mind. How closely is this story sticking to a dedicated first-person narrative structure? In other words, are the parts that are told from Xiao Ke's perspective meant to be a factual recounting of events, thus actually shifting the story from a first to a third-person viewpoint, or are they merely the first-person narrator's imagination of the events taking place inside the prison, thus preserving, at least in part, the first-personness of the narrative frame?

Although it may be impossible to know for sure what parts of the story are real and what parts, if any, are imagined, a comparison of the first person scenes in which Xia Shang is the narrator and the third-person scenes in which the readers experience events through Xiao Ke's viewpoint shows a marked difference between the two halves of the story. In general, the parts of the story that follow Xia Shang tend to be grounded and realistic whereas the parts that follow Xiao Ke tend to be more surreal.

The main part of Xiao Ke's story that seems unreal is the titular "finger-guessing game." The prisoners in the jail cell take turns playing this game with each other to determine by process of elimination which one of them is guilty of having slept with the prostitute who had accused them all. However, each time one of them loses the game and is accused by the others of being the culprit, he is then soon after released and cleared of all charges. "That afternoon two more people were released. One was Roasted Nuts Bakery Salesman Wang, and the other was Trademark Purchasing Agent Tang. What should be pointed out is that before this these two men had

coincidentally just lost the finger-guessing game.” (37) Towards the conclusion of the story it becomes clear that this is more than mere coincidence. In the end only Xiao Ke and one other prisoner are left in the cell playing the finger-guessing game. “But they could not finish the game. For a full six or seven minutes, their selections were completely the same.” (40) Although technically possible, this level of coincidence is highly unlikely, and thus it seems as if there is an element of fate at work in this story.

Compare this to the parts of the story told from Xia Shang’s perspective. Although there is certainly an element of nostalgia and imagination to Xia Shang’s story, it is still firmly grounded in reality. In fact, Xia Shang’s wide variety of realistic experiences, from a shopping trip to reminiscing about a past romance to a sobering visit to a different prison make the world of Xiao Ke’s tiny prison cell seem almost dreamlike in comparison.

And it is this comparison that is most telling. Had the story been solely told from Xiao Ke’s perspective then readers could have just interpreted this as a surrealist story and accepted what happened with the finger-guessing game without questioning. But when this is compared to a more realistic depiction of events when the first-person narrator is being followed, the reader is forced to question the veracity of events in the prison cell.

This is a reversal of the traditional first-third person perspective dichotomy in which “the first-person perspective is immersed, non-reflective, essentially perceptual and, in this sense, subjective. The contrast is with the reflective, detached or, in this sense, objective nature of the third person perspective.”<sup>2</sup> If one were to take the traditional view and look at the third person narration in this story as objective and the first person narration as subjective then one would be forced to conclude that a surrealist world is a more objective representation of reality than a

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<sup>2</sup> Eilan, Naomi. "The First Person Perspective." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 95 (1995): 51-66.



realistic world. Of course, there are plenty of elements of subjectivity in the first-person narration in this story, but in terms of the basic veracity of the events happening one has to give the edge to the realistic first-person perspective.

Alva Noë posited that perception itself creates a sort of distance between the perceiver and that which is perceived.<sup>3</sup> In the case of “The Finger-Guessing Game”, the first-person perspective that persists for most of the story distances the readers from the parts of the narrative that are in the third-person for the purpose of casting doubt on the veracity of the events therein. Thus, the perspectival shifts are integral for creating the surreal tone of the parts of the novel that take place in the prison cell.

#### 2.1.2 Perspective and Translation

When translating fiction, translators often choose to translate out instances of “illogicality”. For the purposes of translation, Dan Shen defines illogicality in one of four ways. The first is “that which comes from mental activities prior to the state of complete awareness,” the second is “that which is attributable to the absence or loss of normal reasoning power,” the third is “that which is to be accounted for by the complexity or change or change in a character’s trait or mood or attitude or the like,” and the fourth is “that which is deliberately encoded by the author at the level of the narrating discourse to achieve certain effects.”<sup>4</sup> The perspectival shifts in “The Finger-Guessing Game” are clearly an example of the fourth type of illogicality.

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<sup>3</sup> Noë, Alva. "Causation and Perception: The Puzzle Unraveled." *Analysis* 63, no. 2 (April 2003): 93-100.

<sup>4</sup> Shen, Dan. “On the Aesthetic Function of “Illogicality” in English-Chinese Translation of Fiction.” *Style*, Vol. 22, No. 4. Penn State University Press.

There are many reasons why translators might choose to translate out instances of illogicality in fiction. They might feel like the cultural differences between the source language and the target language render the illogicality even more incomprehensible. They may think that the illogicality is not necessary or not very aesthetically pleasing in the target language. Or they may simply not have understood the purpose behind the use of illogicality in the source text.

Although the first two of these reasons may seem logical, it is still preferable to maintain the “illogicality” of the source text in the translation. For example, in the case of “The Finger-Guessing Game”, if one was to translate out the illogicality, then the feeling of surrealness created by the viewpoint shifts would be lost. Preserving this very important thematic element is far more important than creating an artistically pleasing translation.

This is not to say that preserving this textual illogicality makes creating an artistically pleasing translation impossible. In fact, some would argue that it is necessary to maintain the illogicality of the source text in order to creating a natural and artistic translation. As Dan Shen puts it, “I am committed, apart from a devotion to the original work, to the aesthetics which appreciates the ingenious interference of the monologic narrator, the subtle superimposition of one point of view upon another, the paradoxical effect accompanying the divergent double-decoding, and the resultant textual density.”<sup>5</sup> This posits not only that preserving illogicality is necessary for preserving the thematic and metatextual elements of a work of fiction, but that a significant portion of the artistic value of a work of fiction is derived from these elements, and that therefore removing them would rob the resulting translation of both meaning and aesthetics.

Prominent examples of this illogicality in “The Finger-Guessing Game” are the sections in which Xiao Ke is reflecting on his friend Xia Shang. Since Xia Shang is the first-person narrator

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<sup>5</sup> Shen.

of the story, there is some ambiguity about whether the third person sections told from Xiao Ke's perspective are meant to be real events or merely Xia Shang's imagining what is going on in the prison cell. To have Xiao Ke reflect on Xia Shang adds yet another layer of ambiguity: is this a case of Xia Shang imagining what Xiao Ke thinks of him?

Xiao Ke is often wondering about what his wife, Cong Rong, and Xia Shang are doing in his absence.

Where was Cong Rong right now? Xiao Ke leaned back against the wall and once again began to consider this question. As far as he was concerned, he had good reason to worry, after all Xia Shang was Cong Rong's first love. Xiao Ke and Xia Shang were only casual friends, and they also were rivals in love, so their friendship hadn't really gone anywhere. This situation was common enough. (18)

Xiao Ke's thoughts about what Xia Shang and Cong Rong are doing always mirror Xia Shang's own thoughts on the situation. Xia Shang is constantly worried that any of his attempts to comfort Cong Rong will be seen by her as him hitting on her, and he himself is not sure of his own motives.

Indeed, there was nothing I could say to her, because I had no intentions towards her, and *could* have no intention towards her. Even though we had been lovers, this had already become a past that was hard to look back on. She also understood this. Even though I still felt some attachment to her, I still could not condemn her husband. If I did, I would be saying that Cong Rong had married wrong, that her marriage was a mistake, because Xiao Ke was a scoundrel. But then what would that make me? (22)

This creates an obvious question in readers' minds: is Xiao Ke really worrying about Xia Shang and Cong Rong, or is Xia Shang just imagining that he is? "The Finger-Guessing Game" never answers this question. Xia Shang and Xiao Ke are never able to sit down and talk about their experiences, so the only information the reader gets is what is presented to them by the narrators, and it is never quite clear how reliable these narrators are.

The fact that this question is never answered is extremely important. The uncertainty created by the reader not knowing how much they should trust the narrative that is being presented to them in many ways mirrors the uncertainty faced by those playing the finger-guessing game.

“In this particular space, who could not be suspicious of each other?” (29) By the end of the story Xiao Ke has fallen into a deep sense of suspicion and fatalism.

Many questions are never answered in this story. How did the “woman in the photograph” obtain Xiao Ke’s ID card, along with the ID cards of the other men in the cell? Which of the other men, if any, did actually sleep with her? Was there actually an element of fate to the finger-guessing game, or was it all just coincidence? In the end, the answers to these questions are left up to the reader to decide. And in fact, if the story had presented clear-cut answers to these questions, they could be said to have marred the mysterious atmosphere that “The Finger-Guessing Game” had cultivated up to that point.

From this it can be concluded that providing answers is not the aim of “The Finger-Guessing Game.” On the contrary, it provokes readers to ask questions and then find the answers to those questions themselves. The atmosphere of mystery and unknowing that is created in the novel carries over into real life.

Thus, a translation of this story must also transmit this sense of mystery and unknowing, by preserving the illogicality of the source text. This is easier said than done. It is a commonly held truism that no translation can every perfectly capture the essence of the original. As Susan Bassnet puts it in her book *The Handbook of Creative Writing*,

Since no two languages are the same, it follows that no translation will ever be identical to the original. Moreover, since different cultures have different world-views, it follows also that such differences will also be encoded in the language. The translator must decide not only what can be done on a linguistic level, but also the extent to which cultural differences can be translated.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, a decision has to be made about how much of the tone of the source text it is even possible to preserve.

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<sup>6</sup> Bassnett, Susan. "Translation." In *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, edited by Earnshaw Steven, 367-73. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Certainly, much of it can. A great deal of the mystery present in the original novel is captured by the events themselves, rather than the way these events are described. Case in point, there is a persistent trend of characters not telling each other what is going on right away. An example of this is when Xiao Ke is first arrested. The police officers continuously stonewall Xiao Ke's attempts to find out what he has done. Consider the following dialogue:

“不行，不给我说清楚，我不能跟你们走。”

警察乙看出了他的心思，低声说：‘有人把你供出来了，你不能不去。’

‘我干什么了，被谁供出来了?’

‘你去了不就知道了么?’”

which can be translated as:

“No. If you don't tell me clearly what's going on, I'm not going anywhere.”

Officer B saw his determination, and said in a low voice, ‘Someone has accused you; you have to go.’

‘What have I done? Who turned me in?’

‘If you come with us, you'll find out.’” (4)

As can be seen, in this passage Xiao Ke's frustration and confusion can be felt from a relatively straightforward translation of the dialogue, without being obfuscated by any cultural or linguistic barriers.

This is not the only case of the mysterious nature of the novel coming across directly through events. When Xiao Ke first enters the jail cell, he is subject to a peculiar experience:

发现屋里还有一个人，和他一样也戴了副玳瑁眼镜，衣着神态也与自己一般无二，他愣了愣，用手去扶眼镜架，那人也做了这个动作，走过去一瞧，原来是一面镜面铁皮做成的窗户。

This can be translated as:

He crouched down on the ground and discovered that there was someone else in the room with him, wearing the same tortoise shell glasses as him, and with the expression on his face exactly the same as his own. He stared blankly, holding up his glasses frames with his hand, and the man in there with him did the same. He walked over, and discovered that it was just his reflection in the iron sheet that acted as a window. (17-18)

Here, once again the confusion that Xiao Ke is feeling is transmitted to the reader directly through what happens, rather than through description or an internal monologue. Xiao Ke is so distraught that he initially mistakes his reflection in a sheet of iron to be another person. As anyone who has ever seen their distorted reflection in a piece of metal can attest, this is not an easy mistake to make, and thus clearly shows Xiao Ke's state of mind.

These and many other examples show that, while it is of course impossible to perfectly capture the strange atmosphere that pervades this novel in an English translation, it is certainly possible, and indeed, necessary, to capture a good deal of it.

## 2.2 Authorial Self-Insertion

One of the most striking features of “The Finger Guessing Game”, and indeed of Xia Shang's writing in general, is the fact that the main characters in many of his stories are named after him. One may be tempted to take Roland Barthes's adage, “The author is dead,”<sup>7</sup> to heart in

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<sup>7</sup> Barthes, Roland. Susan Sontag, ed. *A Barthes Reader*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

this instance and pay this piece of trivia no mind. However, the similarity does not end with merely the characters' names. These characters are all writers, some of them live in Shanghai, where Xia Shang is from, and one of them is even said to have a son named Xia Zhou, which is the name of Xia Shang's actual son. Thus, even though the author's intentions in writing the story should not influence readers' interpretation of that story, these similarities are certainly no coincidence, and surely point to deeper themes.

In the following section, the authorial self-insertion in "The Finger-Guessing Game" will be compared with that of one of Xia Shang's other stories, "Suspicion." Both of these short stories appear in a collection of Xia Shang's stories, also entitled "The Finger-Guessing Game". Here it will be shown that the authorial self-insertion in each of these stories is used to different ends, and therefore should be understood differently. A discussion of what implications this has for translating this work will follow.

### 2.2.1 In Search of the Author

In the introduction to the collection of short stories entitled "The Finger-Guessing Game", Xia Shang himself admits that the intentions of the author have little bearing on how a work is received, saying, "After it is published, the fate of a novel has basically nothing to do with the author. It is like a kite floating far away, and the author does not have the string in hand." It would seem, then, that he more or less agrees with Roland Barthes on the matter of authorial intent. Thus, there is little value to be gleaned from digging into Xia Shang's personal reasons for inserting a character named after himself into his stories, nor from looking into Xia Shang's own life to find similarities with his characters.

It should also be noted that just because these characters share a name and many similarities with the author, this does not necessarily mean that they are based on him or represent him or his opinions. These are characters in a story, and are no more a reflection of the author than any of the other characters.

With that being said, there is still a good reason to delve into the effects that authorial self-insertion has on the text. Readers are going to notice that the viewpoint character in each of these stories is named after and bears similarities to the author, and that is going to color their perception of the stories, whether it is theoretically useful to do so or not. Thus, rather than exploring why Xia Shang chose to name these characters after himself and what that says about him, it is far more relevant to simply ask: what effect does this writing style have on the readers? Answering this question can give a much deeper understanding of the themes and narrative devices used in these stories.

But before this question can be answered, it is necessary to examine each of the Xia Shangs in detail. Although they all share many similarities with each other and with the author himself, there are subtle differences in both their characters and how they are applied in their respective stories that speak volumes about their purpose in these narratives.

In “The Finger-Guessing Game”, Xia Shang is both observer and observed. In his role as viewpoint character, Xia Shang provides a lot of context for the what is going on outside of the prison cell. His reflections on his past relationship with Cong Rong and her subsequent relationship with Xiao Ke give readers insight into why some of the other characters act the way that they do. And his visit to his other friend, Jiang, in prison shows readers what would happen to Xiao Ke if he is convicted of his crime.



On the other hand, during the parts of the story that are experienced through Xiao Ke's eyes, Xia Shang becomes yet another subject for observation, if only through Xiao Ke's thoughts and recollections. Xiao Ke is constantly worrying about Xia Shang and Cong Rong being together, thinking that with himself being locked up the two of them might have the chance to rekindle their romantic feelings towards each other. This, of course, speaks volumes about Xiao Ke's perception of his relationships with his friend and his wife.

However, as mentioned in the previous section, the use of both first and third person viewpoints puts readers in an awkward position. On the one hand, since Xiao Ke's fears about Cong Rong and Xia Shang being together match up with Xia Shang's own feelings on the subject, it is tempting to say that this means that both narratives can be trusted. However, it could be equally argued that the scenes of Xiao Ke in the prison cell are merely imagined by Xia Shang, or are colored by his imagination, and thus Xiao Ke is only thinking what Xia Shang imagines he would be thinking.

This ambiguity is further compounded by the author's identity being tied up in the character of Xia Shang. In modern literature, there is always the possibility that the viewpoint character is an unreliable narrator, one whose point of view "may not be in accordance with the author's point of view implicit in the novel or with the 'truth' as it is revealed in the interaction of character and situation in the course of the novel."<sup>8</sup> There is assumed to be an implicit 'truth' in a work of fiction, one that is endowed by the author and that may or may not be at odds with reality as presented by the narrator. Thus, an unreliable narrator can often be identified by hints at variance between their interpretation of events and the author's 'truth'.

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<sup>8</sup> Engler, Kay. "The Unreliable Narrator." In *The Structure of Realism: The Novelas Contemporáneas of Benito Pérez Galdós*, 137-84. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1977.

However, such differences can be harder or even impossible to spot when the line between author and narrator is blurred. Although readers may not necessarily trust narrators, they tend to implicitly trust authors. After all, if anyone can be said to know the truth of a story, it should be the author. And while a distinction must be drawn between the author and the character of Xia Shang, it is impossible to completely dispel the notion that the two may be connected.

Something that makes it even more difficult to dispel the notion that the author and the viewpoint character may be connected is the emotional weight that Xia Shang's name has when looked at in the context of his relationship with Cong Rong. Xia Shang is the birth name of neither the character nor the author: both of them were born as Xia Wenyu. The use of his real name is used as a measure of how close he is to Cong Rong. When they are dating, she calls him simply Wenyu, a very familiar form of his real name. After they break up but are still friends, she calls him Xia Wenyu, still using his real name to indicate her deep understanding of him but in a more formal manner to indicate the distance that has grown between them. After they stop spending so much time together, she begins to call him Xia Shang like everyone else, indicating that their relationship has deteriorated to the point where they are nothing more than common friends.

Thus, the character's name has a real effect on the emotional landscape of the story. In the difference between the meanings of Wenyu, Xia Wenyu, and Xia Shang readers see a picture of the author's identity and isolation. And by using his own name for the character, Xia Shang reinforces the idea that this connection applies to the real world as well and is not merely confined to the world of the novel.

The connection between the character of Xia Shang and the author goes beyond merely having the same name. "The Finger-Guessing Game" is set in the Pudong district of Shanghai, where Xia Shang grew up and spent much of his life. The other authors who appear in the story

are all real people. And Xia Shang's son, Xia Zhou, even makes an appearance in the story, albeit a very brief one.

Thus, although this is certainly a fictionalized version of himself, any readers who are aware of the author's life are going to draw a definite connection between author and character. This may lead them to place greater trust in the narrative fidelity of Xia Shang's viewpoint, and blind them to the fact that any narrator in a work of fiction is subject to their own limitations, preconceptions and interpretations of events, even if they are based on a real person.

Compare this to the narrator of one of the Xia Shang's other stories, "Suspicion." The first-person narrator in this story is never named, although this is not unusual, as he makes up names for all the other characters in the story rather than calling them by their actual names. Identity is a major theme in this story, and the identity of the author is a tricky question, but there is evidence that the viewpoint character of this story is also meant to be Xia Shang. For one thing, he is a writer in search of a character, and the entire story itself is a metaphor for the process of writing. For another, the writer characters in his other short stories, such as "The Finger-Guessing Game" and "Look at the Picture and Tell a Story" are all named Xia Shang, so there is no reason to think that this story is any different.

The main purpose of authorial self-insertion in "Suspicion" is to transform the story into a meta-narrative, a piece of writing about the process of writing. The story itself can be seen as a metaphor for the process of its own conceptualization and construction, a recursive loop that can leave readers questioning the difference between reality and fiction and complicate the barrier between authors and the fictional worlds they create.

This is very different from the authorial self-insertion in "The Finger-Guessing Game." Although there are references to writing and the lives of writers, they are not the main focus of the

novel and serve more as a part of the background. The authorial self-insertion in “The Finger-Guessing Game” still calls into question the difference between reality and fiction just like in “Suspicion”, but as mentioned before it does this in a way that is less about the process of writing itself and more about readers’ implicit trust in the author.

And this is not the only difference between the use of authorial self-insertion in “The Finger-Guessing Game” and “Suspicion”. Whereas the first-person narration in “The Finger-Guessing Game” is highly legitimized by the presence of the author avatar, this is not the case in “Suspicion.” The language in “Suspicion” is so vague and hazy that it seems almost dreamlike. Characters are not given real names, events play out in the manner of a movie (right after the main character finishes *watching* a movie), and in the end the writer leaves it all behind as if none of it was real.

Thus, if the authorial self-insertion is not legitimizing the narrative, then it must serve some other function. One clue for the purpose the authorial self-insertion is the object of the main character’s quest: to find inspiration for his writing. He even refers to the town that he goes to thusly: “The place that I want to go to in my imagination is a small village by the sea, where the people are cunning and crafty, as if afflicted by a disease of the intellect.”<sup>9</sup> This almost makes it seem like the entire story takes place in his imagination.

By contrast, the parts of the story that are related to him by the character Mei Ni and the parts that touch on Hans the Clown’s past, e.g. the parts of the story narrated in third-person, feel a little bit more grounded and realistic. This is because the story of Hans the Clown and Mei Ni is a relatively common sort of story of corrupt officials’ sons and how they always want to get their

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<sup>9</sup> 夏, 商. 《嫌疑.》 上海: 华东师范大学出版社, 2018.

own way. It is believable because it is something that readers have seen many times before in fiction and even in real life.

Thus, we can see that once again the contrast between first and third person perspectives is being used to create distance between the readers and the story. However, the distance in this story has the opposite effect from that in “The Finger-Guessing Game” in that doubt is not cast on the reality of the third-person narration, but on the first-person narration. This makes sense given the theme of the story: a writer travelling to a small town to find inspiration. A question that is always in the back of readers’ heads is while reading “Suspicion” is: how real are the things that are happening, and how much of them are the main character’s imagination? It is the distance between readers and story that is created by perspective that is responsible for this question.

And the authorial self-insertion only widens this distance between story and reader. By situating the main character of the story as an author in search of a character, it is almost like Xia Shang is telling this story to himself, with the readers as only accidental observers. And indeed, in the preface to this collection of novellas, Xia Shang writes: “A novel is foremost the author’s, and only after that the readers’.”

The contrast between the use of authorial self-insertion in “The Finger-Guessing Game” and in “Suspicion” is telling. In “The Finger-Guessing Game”, the parts told from the perspective of the author avatar serve to distinguish the realistic from the unrealistic, whereas in “Suspicion” they serve to distinguish the unrealistic from the realistic.

This calls into question the veracity of the narration in both of these stories. If there is no consistency in the function of the authorial self-insertion, then how can the readers trust anything that these narrators say? This means that the sense of illogicality created by the unreliable narrators extends beyond the story itself and into the real world. If there is a nominal connection between

the unreliable narrators and the author, then is the author himself an unreliable narrator? It is not important that these questions be answered, like so many of the questions in “The Finger-Guessing Game”. What is important is that the mere act of asking them creates a sense of unreality in the reader’s mind, which puts them in the perfect mindset to empathize with the characters in the story.

### 2.2.2 The Author in Translation

Given the deep semantic importance of the authorial self-insertion in “The Finger-Guessing Game”, it is crucial to have an accurate translation of this narrative device. Although this might seem like a relatively straightforward process, there are some aspects of it that need to be closely considered. For one thing, the translation needs to make it clear that the author and the viewpoint character have the same name to monolingual English readers who may not be familiar with Xia Shang, or who may have trouble distinguishing Chinese names. For another, the translation has to convey the same tones of reality and surreality as the source text in the same places, so as to preserve the connections between realness and viewpoint. In the following section these and other issues will be addressed.

Although to a Chinese speaker the fact that Xia Shang is the name of both the author and the main character of this story should be quite obvious, this fact might not be readily apparent to readers who are monolingual speakers of English . Without a clear grasp of Mandarin’s phonetic inventory, they may merely gloss over the names, or identify them merely by their letters, without making any connections between them. Thus, although they may be able to distinguish between the characters, they will probably not be able to ascribe any particular meaning to their names, nor recognize the fact that the main character is named after the author.

Of course, someone reading this translation with the intention to do a scholarly analysis will probably be paying close enough attention to make this connection, but it is unlikely that someone who is reading for pleasure will. Therefore, it is up to the translator to decide how best to make the connections between author and character clear to the reader.

Although there are potentially dozens of ways that a translator could choose to do this, for the purposes of this paper we will focus on two of the most relevant. The first and perhaps most obvious method is to simply not worry about it. Using this method, the author's name will be used wherever it appears in the text, but no special effort will be taken to reinforce the fact that Xia Shang is the name of both the author and the character. Readers who care about the deeper undercurrents of the story will be able to make the connection, and those who are just reading for pleasure will not, and will be none the worse for it.

The main advantage of this method is that it molds itself to readers' needs without underestimating their intelligence. Not every reader is going to care about the illogicality created by the authorial self-insertion, and this method does not impose these theoretical concerns on them. Likewise, readers who are interested in literary analysis and compositional structure might feel gratified that they were able to discern the authorial self-insertion on their own, rather than having the translator spoon-feed it to them.

The main drawback is, of course, that many readers who might otherwise have enjoyed this narrative element might miss out on the authorial self-insertion. Removing any piece from a literary work detracts from the whole, whether that piece be a plot element, a structural design or a narrative strategy.

This brings us to the second way of dealing with this translation issue, which is to subtly draw attention to the authorial self-insertion through additions and footnotes. Here is an example of what that might look like. Consider the following passage:

“傅建玲说:‘很久没有看见你了, 你的小孩很大了吧。’

我说:‘是的, 会叫爸爸了。’

傅建玲说:‘小孩叫什么名字?’

我说:‘夏周, 夏周。’”

A footnote could be added to this after 夏周 that says something like, “Xia Zhou is the actual name of the author’s son”. In this example, the footnote breaks the fourth wall of the story in order to educate readers about extratextual factors that could affect their understanding.

Or, even more historical information could be included. Consider the following footnote: “Xia Zhou is the actual name of the author’s son. In addition, there is a play on words here. The Xia (夏) and Shang (商) dynasties were the first two dynasties in Chinese history, while the Zhou (周) dynasty was the third.” This way, readers would not only understand the real-life connections between the characters in the story and the author and his son, they would also be introduced to the cultural and historical implications of those names.

The benefits of this second method for dealing with this translation issue are clear. Readers would have a full understanding of the textual and metatextual dynamics at play in the novel. This would be the ideal method for anyone who is perhaps not familiar with Chinese language and culture but does not want to let that get in the way of their understanding. Such a method would work very well for a version of this translation that was to be used in a classroom, for example.



For a commercial work that people would read for pleasure, however, this method falls a bit flat. A reader's eyes would be drawn to the bottom of the page whenever such a footnote occurs, breaking their flow of reading and distracting them from the story itself. Someone who is reading this from an academic perspective may not mind such distractions, but for the casual reader this would be tantamount to an unforgivable offense.

Another equally important consideration is that footnoting this information might give it undue prominence. Seeing that the translator specifically took time to impart these facts in the footnotes might lead readers to pay more attention to it than necessary. To be sure, authorial self-insertion is an important part of "The Finger-Guessing Game", but if only this sort of information and no other is presented in footnotes then readers might assume that this is somehow the most important theme in the novel. Or, worse, they might assume that the translator is implying that the story is based on true events in the author's life, which is not the case.

Thus, the method of translating authorial self-insertion mostly depends on the audience for whom the translation is intended. Of course, a translator cannot know *exactly* who will be reading their work, but it is likely that with a little bit of research and common sense they will be able to tell at least vaguely what sort of people will be interested in their translation. And knowing this, they can tailor their translation to match their interests.

### **2.3 Timeline and Flashbacks**

Compounding the issue of illogicality in "The Finger-Guessing Game" is the uncertainty of the timeline. Although the story happens over the course of only several days, the heavy use of flashbacks expands the time frame to cover a scope of several years, enough time for characters to

fall in love, fall out of love, marry other people and have children. In addition to this, the order of events is itself a bit confused, as will be shown later in this section.

It is clear then that the timeframe of this story is critically important in imparting it with the proper tone and in leaving readers with the feeling that the events in this story, though confined to a short span of time, can be said to have far reaching effects that draw on moments from the characters' pasts and will continue to influence their lives long after the final chapter. In light of this, it is necessary to have a clear and thorough understanding of both how time is used in "The Finger-Guessing Game", and of how to translate it in a way that will both preserve the original feeling and yet still make sense to readers.

### 2.3.1 Time and Space

Anyone reading "The Finger-Guessing Game" will notice the large shifts in the scope of the novel, both in terms of time and of space. The story will go from a flashback that takes place many years in the past, or a story taking place outside the city, to a small, cramped jail cell whose occupants are focused only on the present. And as with so many other things in the novel, this distinction falls very clearly along the lines of the twin narrations of Xia Shang and Xiao Ke.

In this story, Xia Shang almost never stays in one place, or in one timeframe for that matter. Over the course of the story he is constantly moving. Consider the scene in the restaurant at the beginning of the novel. In the short span of time that he is waiting with Cong Rong, he leaves the table twice, first to give some journals to his friend, and then again to order tea. In all the time that

they are there, Cong Rong never leaves the table once, and yet Xia Shang's nervous energy prevents him from staying in one place for more than a paragraph at a time.

Xia Shang's constant migration does not end there. From the restaurant he moves to the police station, to his friend Chang Xiaodong's house, back to his house in Pudong where he meets Cong Rong again, to a coffee shop near his house, to a prison to visit his friend, to a restaurant back in Pudong, to a department store, back to his house, and finally to an unnamed street where he runs into Cong Rong's friend. Compare this to the other characters: Cong Rong, who goes to a few of the same places as Xia Shang and then disappears for much of the story, and Xiao Ke, who spends almost the entire story in the same jail cell.

This use of distance is not accidental. Descriptions of Xia Shang's journeys often go into great detail about how far he had to travel. Chang Xiaodong describes their trip to see their friend in prison thusly:

In order to see Jiang, I got up at 6 AM, and hurried from around Rainbow Bridge to Pudong South Wharf. Then I took a shuttle bus directly to Zhoupu. There's a plate glass factory there, and it's there where Jiang is serving his sentence. Jiang's father went with us, and at 7 AM Xia Shang showed up right on schedule by the bus station. His house isn't far from there. After that everyone got on a bus, and we drove for about an hour. We got off at a quiet stop without any signs. Jiang's father led the way, with Xia Shang and I following behind. We walked for about six or seven minutes, during which time we had to pass through a long and narrow corridor, after which was a wide expanse of crops. We saw a tall electric fence. This was the rear gate, the place for receiving the criminals' loved ones. We first used our ID cards to check in, and then waited to one side for our names to be called. (30)

Each step of the journey is explained in exhaustive detail, making it seem like they had travelled to some faraway place to visit Jiang, when in reality they never left Shanghai.

In addition to the spatial "untetheredness" of Xia Shang's narration, he also does not stick to one timeframe. The parts of the story that follow him are constantly falling into flashbacks of when he was together with Cong Rong. It is not explicitly stated how long they were together, but

the length of time covered in the flashbacks is probably at least several years, as it spans the time from when Xia Shang met Cong Rong to the time when she married Xiao Ke.

The flashbacks are so prevalent that Xia Shang even seems to have a hard time staying in the moment. At one point, he spends so long reminiscing on his time with Cong Rong that his friend Chang Xiaodong notices. “Chang Xiaodong saw me spacing out, and so reminded me by saying, “Are you ready? Are you going or not?” (17) It is clear then that these flashbacks are not merely a narrative device, but something that Xia Shang is actually actively engaging in. Not content to merely travel through space, Xia Shang must also travel through time.

By contrast, the parts of the story that focus on Xiao Ke are remarkably static and present. He spends nearly the entire novel in the same small prison cell; the only other places that he appears are at his hospital where he was arrested, and on the road on the way to the prison. Even in Xia Shang’s flashbacks he never shows up directly. He is often mentioned, and is assumed to have been present at some of the events that Xia Shang is remembering, but he never actively appears in the memories. He is confined both in real space and imaginary space to the same location.

This spatial imprisonment extends not only to Xiao Ke, but to everyone who appears in his viewpoint chapters. All of the accused men are professionals, but with the exception of Professor Ge, their places of work are never mentioned, nor do we hear much of anything about their lives outside the prison cell. And as soon as they are released, they are never heard from again, as if for Xiao Ke the world outside this prison cell no longer exists.

This is further reinforced by a scene in which Salesman Wang attempts to leave by invoking his rights. By bringing up a law that he can only be held for twenty-four hours without being charged, he is able to secure his release from jail. However:

‘That officer took me outside the door to the police station and said to me, ‘You’re free now.’ I looked at him, and he said, ‘What are you staring at? You can go.’ Then I started

to walk forward out onto the road. I really thought that I was free, and I started to run. But a motorcycle pursued me from behind, and stopped in front of me. It was that police officer again. He said to me, 'Get on.' I just got on his motorcycle and he turned back onto the original road. When we got off the bike he said, "You've already been outside. Starting from now you will lose your freedom for the next twenty-four hours. If your case hasn't been solved in the next twenty-four hours, feel free to bring up your rights again." (24)

Any attempts to escape this imprisonment before their allotted time is up end in failure, in other words, they end up right back where they started.

In addition to Xiao Ke's spatial stasis, his story does not freely travel through time like Xia Shang's does. Xiao Ke seldom, if ever, engages in reflective flashbacks, focusing instead on the present reality of his situation. The only times he does do so are when he is trying to figure out whether or not he has ever met the woman in the photograph. And even these recollections are vague and indistinct, and at least partially imaginary.

He tried to uncover his connection with the woman in the photograph, even if it had just been a passing meeting. He conjured up many scenes: a coffee shop, a musical tea salon, various snack stands, a subway station, even the escalator in a department store. But he could not place the woman in the corresponding place. (25)

There is no description of these places, or even any indication that these are actual memories.

In contrast to this, his thoughts about Cong Rong are clearly focused on the present. He is constantly asking himself "What is Cong Rong doing, *right now*?" or "Where are Xia Shang and Cong Rong *now*." He never even wonders about the future. Not once does he think "When am I going to get out of here?" or "How am I going to explain this to Cong Rong?" Instead, his thoughts never go beyond his present situation.

This fixation on the present time mirrors his fixation in a single place. In the same way that his body is imprisoned in the jail cell, his mind is trapped in the same temporal loops over and over again. This sense of imprisonment persists until the final chapter of the novel where even the finger-guessing game, the agent of fate that has heralded the release of some of the other inmates,

proves unable to reach a conclusion. “But they could not finish the game. For a full six or seven minutes, their selections were completely the same.” (40) Xiao Ke is stuck in a loop not just in his own mind, but in real life as well, until such time as fate has decided he can leave (this will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3).

The main exception to Xia Shang’s mobility and Xiao Ke’s staticness is in their pursuit of Cong Rong. In the past, Xia Shang was quite passive in his relationship with Cong Rong while Xiao Ke actively pursued her, with the result that Xiao Ke is the one who married her in the end. However, this serves to further reinforce the effects of Xiao Ke’s passivity in the present. Being stuck in a prison cell, he is unable to talk to her and explain the situation or defend himself, and the result is that he loses her. It was only through his activeness in the past that he was able to be with her, and once he is deprived of this their relationship falls apart.

From this it is clear that that the different aspects of space and time between the two viewpoint characters serve an important purpose in the novel. The freedom of both space and time in Xia Shang’s sections creates a sense of scale that frames the events in the novel in the context of the characters’ lives. On the other hand, the confinement of space and time in Xiao Ke’s story brings the present aspect of the events in the story to the forefront. Together this contrast creates a sense that the events of this novel are both starkly immediate and yet still resonate through time.

### 2.3.2 Translating Time

There are several things that a translator needs to pay attention to when translating this work in order to preserve this contrast between Xia Shang’s time and space and Xiao Ke’s time

and space. The first, and perhaps most important, is the preservation of “time words.” These are words or phrases that clue the reader in as to when the events they are reading about are taking place, for example: “now”, “and then,” “all those years ago,” etc. In many cases a translator might be tempted to do away time words in the original text, or add some to the translation in order to improve readability or to make it sound more natural. However, as shown in the previous section, time is used quite precisely in “The Finger-Guessing Game,” and thus a translator should act with caution when seeking to edit it.

One example of the importance of time that was discussed in the previous section is that whenever Xiao Ke thinks of Cong Rong, he always wonders what she is doing *right now*. For example, at the end of chapter 10 he thinks “此刻丛蓉在干什么呢？” and at the end of chapter 8, “此时此刻丛蓉又在干什么呢？” and at the beginning of chapter 6, “丛蓉现在在哪里呢？” (all emphasis on the time words is mine). In English, “此刻”, “此时此刻”, and “现在” can all be translated as “right now” (or perhaps “at this very moment” for “此时此刻”).

An English translator may be tempted to omit these time words for sake of style, or lack of repetition. They might feel like the constant repetition of “right now” would feel a bit redundant to readers. Instead, they might translate these phrases as something like “What was Cong Rong doing then?” or simply “What is Cong Rong doing?” Although this might break up the repetitiveness of the phrase, it is missing out on the crucial temporal aspect of Xiao Ke’s concern. It misses the *immediateness* of his wondering. Xiao Ke is not concerned with the past or the future, at least not as much as Xia Shang is, he cares about what is happening to his wife *now*. And the translation should reflect that.

The other thing that a translator must consider when thinking about the temporal aspect of this novel is tense. A possible way to go about translating the difference in Xia Shang and Xiao

Ke's viewpoints would be to translate Xia Shang's sections into past tense and Xiao Ke's into present tense. This would go a long way toward creating this distinction in the reader's mind quite early in the process, in a way that would be impossible to miss. This would be quite advantageous in preparing readers for the purposeful illogicality of the novel, and would be an interesting and unique narrative strategy in its own right.

However, the main disadvantage that this method has is that it could very easily confuse readers. Switching back and forth between past and present tense from chapter to chapter could lead them to question when this story is actually taking place, and when events happen in relation to each other.

It could be difficult for translators at some points too. Consider the following example: “萧客在那个房间里满怀愁绪的时刻，我和常小东在一江之隔的浦东某中餐馆对花支描述着上午去周浦看望蒋的经过。” Transitioning from the present tense in the chapter before to the present tense here would be a bit awkward, as the translator would have to use the past tense in this Xia Shang chapter to describe something that had just been described in the present tense in the chapter before.

Another example of this difficulty would be found at the beginning of the novel, where the chapter starts out from Xiao Ke's perspective but then switches to Xia Shang's. This is the only time in the novel in which both of them are viewpoint characters in the same chapter, but it still poses some problems. The part that takes place from Xiao Ke's perspective is repeated in the next chapter, so if one was to simply do the whole first chapter in the past tense, since it is mostly a Xia Shang chapter, then one would have to write about the same events in the past tense in one chapter and the present tense in the next, which would obviously cause some confusion.



The alternative to this would be to switch tenses in the middle of the chapter. This, I would argue, would cause even more confusion, as it is something that is not commonly done in English writing.

Thus, in my view it is better to simply translate the whole story in either the past or the present tense. This eliminates unnecessary confusion and provides an experience for readers that is both more enjoyable and far easier to read.

## CHAPTER 3

### FATE AND THE FINGER-GUESSING GAME

Robert C. Solomon defines fatalism, or the belief in fate, thusly: “Fatalism is the idea that what happens (or has happened) in some sense *has* to (or *had* to) happen.”<sup>10</sup> While the existence or non-existence of fate in the real world is obviously far beyond the scope of this paper, within the realm of literature, fate can certainly be said to be real. After all, the story is being written by an author who (presumably) knows what is going to happen in the end.

There can be no doubt that fate is one of the most important themes in “The Finger-Guessing Game.”. From the sense of doom that Xiao Ke feels from the moment he enters the jail cell to the titular finger-guessing game itself, fate permeates all aspects of this novel. However, rather than acting as a tool for foreshadowing or some kind of moral lesson from the author, as fate often does in literature, it instead acts as a tool to create space between the reader’s expectations and the actual outcomes of events.

In the following section, this assertion on the role of fate will be discussed in greater detail, drawing upon textual evidence and comparing it to some parallel texts. After that will follow a discussion of how to translate fate in “The Finger-Guessing Game” so as to best capture the alienating effects of fatalism in the novel.

#### **3.1 Fate and Expectation**

Fate suffuses the text of “The Finger-Guessing Game” at a very basic level. It is present in both the major themes of the novel and in the smaller assumptions that lay behind it. Before an

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<sup>10</sup> Solomon, Robert C. "On Fate and Fatalism." *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 4 (October 2003): 435-53.

adequate discussion of fate in the novel can be had, it is first necessary to isolate the individual instances of fate therein.

The most important example of fate in “The Finger-Guessing Game” is in the titular finger-guessing game itself. The prisoners in the jail cell play a simple game of scissors-stone-cloth to determine their respective guilt or innocence. They will take turns playing this game with each other, the winners being eliminated from the game, until only two players are left. “The last person to be out will be assumed to be the john.” (32)

Although it is not explicitly stated, by playing this game the prisoners are placing their guilt or innocence, at least in the eyes of the other prisoners, in the hands of fate. Fate is playing the role of judge, and the men in the jail cell submit willingly to it. Although in some ways they do treat the whole thing as a joke, laughing and teasing the ones who end up losing, it is clear that at some basic level they take it very seriously. After all, “No one opposed this game because if they did everyone would think they had a guilty conscience, like a thief.” (32) If they all believed that this was merely a game and nothing more, they would have no problem with refusing to play it.

And in fact, it seems that the finger-guessing game does indeed have some predictive powers, although not in the way that the prisoners think. It turns out that whenever someone loses the finger-guessing game, they are the next person to be released. Boat Captain Yu is the first to lose the game, and not minutes later, even as everyone is jeering at him to confess his crimes and tell them the juicy details, he is released.

The significance of this is not lost on his fellow prisoners: “The irony of this was that Boat Captain Yu was the one who was eliminated from scissors-stone-cloth, and therefore was the supposed john. His release produced a feeling of absurdity in everyone.” (34) This absurdity arises from the complete reversal of their expectations. And the shock is enough to create bad feelings

between them: “Everyone gazed at each other suspiciously, as if each of them harbored some evil design.” (34) This subversion of fate is seen as both something wicked and something that may have been purposely designed by one of their fellow prisoners.

This, however, does not stop them from continuing to trust in fate. The very next day, they continue to play the finger-guessing game. The sequence of events is the same, someone loses, the rest of the prisoners pressure them to tell a story about their experience with the prostitute, and then they are released. This happens to two more of the prisoners, and by this point it seems that they have to come to accept the new role of fate in this game: that the one who loses and is presumed to be guilty is actually innocent (or at least the police cannot prove their guilt). This can be seen from the attitude of the losers: “Their mood was better than Boatman Yu’s, there were no denials, and in fact they told their stories with great relish. The story that Salesman Wang came up with was particularly good, owing to the fact that the content that he related was quite dirty, and didn’t go into any unnecessary details.” (37) The jovial mood of these men shows that by this point they have accepted that fate is working in the opposite direction from what they expected, and thus they believe that losing the game means they will be released.

However, not everyone is so lucky. After two other prisoners are taken away due to illness and injury respectively, only two men are left in the cell: Xiao Ke and Secretary Zhang. The two men engage in the finger-guessing game one last time, but continuously make the same selection for several minutes straight. In the end, before one of them is able to win, Xiao Ke is released. This once again runs counter to the prisoners’ expectations, and perhaps the readers’ as well. Instead of the established pattern of the loser of the finger-guessing game being released, the release now appears to be irrespective of the game.

From this we can see a clear progression of the perceived role of fate in the lives of the prisoners. First, they seek to use the game to divine who is guilty. When this proves to be futile, they seek to use the game to divine who is innocent. And while this does work for a while, in the end the game proves insufficient to prove anything.

This reversal of expectations with regard to fate is not unique to “The Finger-Guessing Game.” In Mo Yan’s Nobel Prize in Literature acceptance speech, he tells the following story. During a violent thunderstorm, a group of workers takes shelter from the rain in an old, rundown temple. The rain does not abate, and so the workers conclude that this storm must have come as punishment for one of them, who presumably must have done something awful to merit it. Since none of them is willing to confess, they turn to fate, and a game, to determine guilt. They agree to each throw their straw hats outside the temple, and whoever’s hat does not blow back in must be guilty, and therefore will be thrown out into the rain as a sacrifice so as to spare the innocent. They do so, and in the end only one hat does not blow back into the temple. The workers conclude that this must be the guilty man, and so throw him out into the storm. And then, in a familiar reversal of expectations, as soon as the man is out of the temple, lightning strikes it, bringing it down on all those inside.<sup>11</sup>

The parallels between that story and “The Finger-Guessing Game” are clear. The one who should be found guilty by fate is instead found innocent, so the games that humans play to divine fate are not only woefully inadequate, they are actively deceptive. Mo Yan couches this story as one told to him by his grandfather, implying that it is an old story. He also says “I’ll bet you all

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<sup>11</sup>Mo Yan – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019. Tue. 5 Feb 2019.  
<<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/yan/25452-mo-yan-nobel-lecture-2012/>>

know how the story ends,”<sup>12</sup> implying that the moral or meaning of this story is not only universal, but also obvious.

Of course, like any good story, there are many possibilities as to what this “obvious, universal” message might be. The simplest, however, and the one that both Mo Yan’s story and “The Finger-Guessing Game” are most likely hitting at, is that fate is outside of human control, and is beyond human attempts to divine it.

In *A Sourcebook on Chinese Philosophy*, Wing-tsit Chan lays out the traditional Chinese views of fate as follows:

In ancient China there were five theories about destiny or the Mandate of Heaven. The first was fatalism: the Mandate of Heaven is fixed and unchangeable. The second was moral determinism: Heaven always encourages virtue and punishes evil; therefore, man can determine his reward and punishment through moral deeds. The third was anti-fatalism, advocated by the Moist School. The fourth was naturalistic fatalism, which means that destiny is not controlled by Heaven in the sense of an anthropomorphic God but by Nature and works automatically. Lastly, there was the Confucian theory of "waiting for destiny." According to this doctrine, man should exert his utmost in moral endeavor and leave whatever is beyond our control to fate. It frankly admits that there are things beyond our control but that is no reason why one should relax in his moral endeavor.<sup>13</sup>

At first glance, it would seem that both Mo Yan’s story and “The Finger-Guessing Game” fall into either the first category, “fatalism”, or the fourth “naturalistic fatalism”. After all, all human attempts to divine fate and punish those responsible for the evil that has befallen them fail. It seems that destiny in these stories is utterly indifferent to human desires.

However, upon closer inspection there can be seen to be a thread of moralism running through both stories. In Mo Yan’s story, the men who throw the loser of the hat-tossing game out of the temple can be seen to be performing an immoral act: sacrificing someone who has been found guilty not through judicial process or by divine judgement, but simply through a method of

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<sup>12</sup> Mo Yan – Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019. Tue. 5 Feb 2019.  
<<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2012/yan/25452-mo-yan-nobel-lecture-2012/>>

<sup>13</sup> Chan, Wing-tsit. *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963.

divining fate constructed entirely by humans. In that sense, they are transgressing against the Confucian idea of fate, in which one should not try to change that which one cannot control.

The moral undertones of the finger-guessing game are bit more complicated. Unlike the faceless workers in Mo Yan's tale, we know a bit more about the men in the prison cell. The ones who are initially released are probably the most innocent. The first to be released is Boatman Yu, the simple soul who is slow to understand innuendos and blushes at all the dirty jokes. After him are Wang and Tang, the two characters who perhaps have the least character development, and thus there is little reason to suspect them of any wrongdoing.

Things get a little more complicated after this. Professor Ge and Editor Song are not released, so there is no way to know if they are still under suspicion or not. But Professor Ge knew the woman in the photograph, she was a student at his school, and so even though he denies any involvement with her, he is as likely as anyone to be the guilty party. If this is the case, then his catching pneumonia could be seen as "punishing evil."

One question that is not answered is what becomes of Secretary Zhang. The fates of all the other prisoners are clear: Boatman Yu, Salesman Wang, Agent Tang and Xiao Ke are released, Lecturer Ge catches pneumonia and is taken away to avoid infection, and Editor Song breaks his leg and is taken to the hospital. Secretary Zhang, however, is the last one left in the cell. Is he eventually convicted, or is he set free as well? It is important to note that although the prisoners certainly think that one among them must actually be guilty, there is no guarantee that this is actually the case. It is probable that the fate of Secretary Zhang is thematically connected to that of Xiao Ke, as evidenced by their prolonged game, and by the second major instance of fate in the novel.

Starting from when he first enters the prison cell, Xiao Ke is constantly assailed by a sense of foreboding. At first, he thinks this is simply because he is worrying about Xia Shang and Cong Rong, but later it becomes clear that this is a premonition about his own future. The first time this comes into play is after the first time they play the finger-guessing game. “A bad feeling was growing inside him, it seemed like something big was about to happen.” (34) And mere seconds later Boatman Yu, the first loser of the finger-guessing game, is released.

It is interesting to note that Xiao Ke refers to the premonition that Boatman Yu will be released as a “bad feeling.” Although this indeed is not really a benefit to him, it would seem at first glance that Boatman Yu’s innocence would not bring any harm to Xiao Ke. Thus, he should not have any trepidation about it at all.

It is probable then that in Xiao Ke’s mind he assumes that in the end there will only be one person left in the cell, and that that person will be found guilty of the crime. Although there is not necessarily a logical basis for this belief, after all, it is equally possible that there are multiple guilty parties, or none at all, it does fit in very well with the sequence of events that follows.

Xiao Ke’s premonitions do not end with Boatman Yu’s release. “Pharmacist Xiao Ke once again hid his head between his knees, as if this position could stop the feeling of unease inside him.” (35) Clearly, he realizes that fate is not done with him, and indeed it is not long before the fatalistic aspect of the finger-guessing game comes into play again.

The next day, Salesman Wang and Trademark Purchasing Agent Tang both lose the finger-guessing game and are subsequently released as well. The psychological effect that this reversal of expectations has on the prisoners is palpable:

And so, there were only four people left in the room: Professor Ge, Secretary Zhang, Literary Editor Song and Pharmacist Xiao Ke. Their feelings were plain on their faces, especially the first two. They were clearly not as lively as before. The three men who had been freed before them burdened their already weighty psychological pressure. Just like a



gradually shrinking encirclement, the true criminal was about to be revealed. Tension and unease quite obviously remained on the faces of the four left-over men. (37)

Their unease comes not only from the stress of being imprisoned, but also from their acceptance of the determinative power of the finger-guessing game.

All throughout this story, Xiao Ke believes, and the reader is led to believe, that the bad feeling he is having is that he will eventually be the last one left in the cell, and that he will be convicted of a crime that he did not commit. However, in the end he is released as well, and it would seem that he has avoided his fate. But then, in the second to last chapter, it becomes clear that the bad feeling he was having did not refer to being found guilty at all, but rather to his wife, Cong Rong. While he was in prison, she had an abortion, presumably as a way to break herself away from a husband that she assumed had been unfaithful to her.

This is once again a serious reversal, or perhaps transcendence, of expectations. Although the doom that Xiao Ke thought he had foreseen did not occur, an entirely different one did, justifying his “bad feelings” and the sense of unease he had had the whole time.

In his essay, “Fate, Agency and the Economy of Desire in Chinese Ritual and Society,” Steven Sangren argues that, with regard to the place of fate and fortune-telling in Chinese culture, “beneath the wish to control the future, whose rationale is apparently self-evident, lies a psychologically more fundamental desire to claim ownership of one’s being-or, in contemporary parlance, to assert agency...in China, concern with fate is a culturally particular variant of this general human concern.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the reason that people seek to know the future and influence its outcome is in order to fulfill a form of self-actualization, to take control of their lives

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<sup>14</sup> Sangren, P. Steven. "Fate, Agency, and the Economy of Desire in Chinese Ritual and Society." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 56, no. 2 (2012): 117-35.

and their destiny, even in the midst of a worldview that does not necessarily allow for such self-agency.

This apparent contradiction lies at the heart of the unease felt by Xiao Ke and the other participants in the finger-guessing game. These men have been thrown into prison based on a crime that each of them claims they did not commit. In other words, they have been stripped of all power and agency by something completely beyond their control. By playing the finger-guessing game to determine who is guilty, the men are seeking to regain at least a modicum of control over their situation, if only by knowing who is guilty, in other words, who is responsible for their predicament. After all, knowledge is power.

Unfortunately for them, this ploy is unsuccessful. Fate confounds their attempts to divine it, and with it any hope of them regaining some of their lost agency. And even when they think they have it figured out, when they realize that the losers of the finger-guessing game are the ones who will be released, their expectations are once again shattered when the next two releases have nothing to do at all with the finger-guessing game, and when the final game is inconclusive. Their constant inability to predict the future destroys the last hope at agency that these men have.

### **3.2 Translating Fate**

Fate is, of course a concept that most, if not all, cultures around the world possess and ascribe great meaning to. However, what exactly is meant by “fate”, and how much importance is attached to it, varies from society to society. In this section how best to translate fate in a way that

will both preserve all of the original implications and still satisfy readers of the English version will be discussed.

Of paramount importance is the fact that the word “fate” (命运) is not used once in “The Finger-Guessing Game.” Thus, the sense of fate that pervades the novel cannot be translated directly, unless one was to add words that are not there in the original. Instead, one must convey this through tone and implication.

The fatalistic tone of “The Finger-Guessing Game” is created by the sense of inevitability that pervades the novel, which in large part is conveyed by people having feelings that something is going to go wrong. For example, after Cong Rong says that she knows what she must do about the situation, Xia Shang wonders: “难道她事先预感到了什么。” The word “预感” is very important here. It implies a sense of foreboding or premonition. Thus, keeping that word in the translation is of paramount importance. So, while one could translate the sentence as something like “Could she have known that something was going to happen?” it is far more accurate to translate it as “Could it be that she had had a premonition about something?” In this way the core fatalism of the statement can be preserved.

The character who has by far the most presentiments, however, is not Cong Rong, but her husband, Xiao Ke. His multiple “bad feelings” after playing the finger-guessing game for the first time show that there is a real element of fate to these events, even though it is not what he expects. Conveying these feelings of his also takes some careful translation. Consider the following example: “萧客没有加入说话的队伍，蜷缩在墙角闭目养神，他心里其实乱极了，他有种不好的感觉，好像有什么重大的事情要发生，他的头垂在膝盖之间，使人看不到他苦不堪言的表情。” In this passage, his premonition is referred to simply as a kind of “不好的感觉”, a “bad feeling.” The actual predictive part comes in the next sentence: “好像有什么重大的事情要

发生,” or “it seemed like something important was going to happen.” Therefore, in the original Chinese, Xiao Ke’s premonition is only implied, rather than outright stated. The question, then, is whether it is better to translate this directly and leave in the ambiguity, or strengthen the fatalistic elements in this sentence.

A clue as to how to best translate this comes at the end of the chapter, when Xiao Ke’s feeling of unease is repeated. “药剂师萧客再次将脑袋藏在膝盖间，他以这种姿势抵制着内心不安的预感。” Here, we can see that the word “预感” is used again, so the fatalistic elements of the scene become clearer. In addition, we can tell that this “premonition” is indeed connected to the previous “bad feeling” because it is introduced with the adjective “不安的”, or “uneasy.” Therefore, a translation that shows the predictive nature of Xiao Ke’s feelings here might run something like: “Pharmacist Xiao Ke once again hid his head between his knees, as if this position could stop the uneasy premonition inside him.”

This is not an exhaustive list of all the ways to translate fate in “The Finger-Guessing Game”, but merely a brief glance at a few of the most notable examples. But from this brief glance a pattern can be drawn as to how to deal with the notion of fate in this novel. When faced with the question of whether to choose the more fatalistic interpretation of a phrase, or the less fatalistic, in most cases choosing the more fatalistic will cleave closer to the original meaning of the novel.

## CHAPTER 4

### IDIOM AND METAPHOR

Although the large translation issues that we have already discussed are the most immediate concerns for a translator, there are others that, while not as pressing, are no less important. The foremost of these miscellaneous translation issues are 成语, idioms and sayings that have become part of the everyday Chinese language. Translating idioms is always a difficult task, as they are full of cultural connotations and assumptions that the listener is familiar with the history and literature of China. The conundrum is that if one is to translate them literally, they will not probably not make sense to someone unfamiliar with Chinese history and culture, and thus will have to be explained in a footnote or something similar. On the other hand, if one translates them out and replaces them with a more mundane English expression, a lot of the literary richness of the original will be lost. The ideal solution would be to replace an idiom with an equivalent English idiom. However, there is not always an English equivalent for every Chinese idiom, and even if there is, it will rarely capture the exact same meaning of the original, and it will never carry the same cultural implications that may be important for the final meaning of the phrase.

Chinese idioms form an important structural component of the language, and part of this is due to their form.

In form, Chinese idioms often reflect the syntactic structures of traditional literary Chinese. They have their established syllabic and rhythmic structures, i.e. they generally consist of four syllables, and their rhythm pattern is two plus two irrespective of different grammatical and semantic structures. The regular syllables and clear rhythms are one of the most prominent stylistic features of Chinese idioms. In source and meaning, a great number of idioms come from traditional literature. So, compared to some other vernacular set expressions such as folk proverbs and *xiehouyu*, idioms have more antique and literary color in their original meaning.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Yang, Lan. "Idioms, Proverbs, Xiehouyu, and Classical Verses." In *Chinese Fiction of the Cultural Revolution*, 165-80. Hong Kong University Press, 1998.

Thus, the way that Chinese idioms are constructed plays an important role in the overall literary flavor of the text.

No translation will be able to perfectly capture the literary intricacies of the source material, so it is necessary for the translator to know which battles are worth fighting. In other words, the translator needs to know when to translate out an idiom into more common language, and when to preserve it and explain it to readers. This will have to be on a case by case basis. Therefore, in this section I will discuss some of the idioms in play in “The Finger-Guessing Game” and explain my reasoning behind how I translated them.

The first idiom of note in this story is “面露难色.” This phrase appears when Cong Rong is talking about the weight she has gained during her pregnancy and how she has trouble fitting into new clothes. Its basic meaning is “to show signs of hesitation.” A colorful way of translating it might be: “with a face full of hesitation” or “with her hesitation clear on her face.” This would be a bit closer to the original meaning, as well as a bit more flavorful than simply translating it as “hesitantly”, but consider the following translation of the phrase “不过她又面露难色说”: “but then she said, with a face full of hesitation.” This sentence fragment feels unwieldy and unnatural in English, especially when compared to the much more elegant, “but then she said hesitantly.”

The next idiom of importance is “大惊失色,” which appears after Xia Shang receives the call from the public security bureau. This idiom can be translated as “to turn pale with fright,” although more literally it would be something more like “lose color due to great shock.” This idiom is used by itself, in the sentence “我大惊失色,” so there are no other words in the sentence to muddle up its meaning. Thus, using the more colorful “I turned pale with fright,” is preferable to something more mundane, like “I was shocked.”

Some time after this, the idiom “情不自禁” appears when talking about how Xia Shang could not help but ask Cong Rong for a dance when they first met. This idiom literally means “unable to restrain one’s emotions,” but is used in the sense of “not being able to help but do something.” Although one could translate the sentence “我虽然不会跳舞，还是情不自禁邀她跳了一曲。” as “Although I couldn’t dance, I still could not suppress the emotions that forced me to ask her for one,” this is far too forceful, and does not convey the writer’s intentions clearly. Thus, simply translating it as “Although I couldn’t dance, I couldn’t help asking her for one,” is much preferable.

When Xia Shang and Cong Rong go to the police station, one of the officers says that Xiao Ke has gotten involved in something “不三不四.” The literal translation of “not three not four” makes no sense in English, of course, but even the more idiomatic translation of “neither this nor that” does not really make sense in context either. Therefore, it is necessary to turn to one of the other meanings of 不三不四 to translate this passage “shady or untoward.” This makes much more sense in context; the officer is saying that Xiao Ke has done something shady and thus has been arrested for it.

While chatting with his friends, Xia Shang keeps imagining Cong Rong’s crying face appearing before his eyes. He says that this makes him “心烦意乱.” Literally speaking, this would mean that his “heart (or mind) is troubled and his will (or intention) is disordered.” Although it is clear enough what this means, writing all of that out would make the sentence seem very unnatural to an English speaker reading it. Thus, in this case a more moderate translation of the sentence “这使我心烦意乱” is preferable, such as “This left me terribly upset.”

When describing his reaction to Cong Rong going to see a movie with Xiao Ke, Xia Shang says that he “大发雷霆.” Literally translated, this would mean something like “I let out thunder and lightning.” The meaning is clear, Xia Shang is angry, but again, this sounds a little bit too literal. Fortunately, however, in English storms are often used as a metaphor for anger. Thus, translating this as “I stormed and raged” captures both the metaphorical image of storms as well as the duplication of “雷霆.”

One of the first descriptions of Professor Ge in the novel is that his face “幸灾乐祸” when he sees everyone together in the jail cell. Literally speaking, this means to “take joy in calamity and delight in disaster,” in other words, to take pleasure at the misfortune of others. One could translate the sentence “最让他意外的是有张脸居然在幸灾乐祸” by saying “but most unusual was that one of their faces lit up with pleasure at the misfortune of others.” This would carry across all the meaning of the original, but like many literal translations it does not sound quite right in English. In that case, it makes more sense to directly state what the author is trying to say, “but most surprising was that one of them seemed to be taking pleasure in their misfortune.” By dispensing with talking about Professor Ge’s face, this sentence suddenly seems much more natural.

Later in the same scene, Secretary Zhang says that he knows what Professor Ge means in a “心领神会” manner, “他心领神会地对讲师葛说.” This idiom means to “understand tacitly.” However, the addition of “地” after it turns it from a verb into an adverb modifying “说.” Thus, in order to keep this grammar structure, a good way to translate this one would be “He tacitly said to Professor Ge...” This keeps the same meaning while fitting it naturally into the English sentence.

When talking about all of the people who were turned in by the woman in the photograph, they are referred to as “三教九流.” This literally means that they belong to the three religions



(Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) and the nine schools (Confucians, Daoists, Yin-Yang, Legalists, Logicians, Mohists, Political Strategists, Eclectics and Agriculturists.) However, it is unlikely that in this case they are talking about the religious or philosophical affiliations of the men who were turned in, so it is more likely that this idiom is being used in its more colloquial meaning, “people from all trades.” Thus, in context the best translation is probably something along the lines of “people from all walks of life.”

When explaining why no one refused to play the finger-guessing game, it is said that the men fear that if they refuse, they will be thought to be “做賊心虛.” Literally speaking, this means “to have a guilty conscience, like a thief.” Although it is clear what this means, adding in the part about the thief might be confusing to readers, since these men are in prison for soliciting a prostitute, not thievery. Thus, in this case it seems that the best translation is also the simplest, “to have a guilty conscience.”

After Boat Captain Yu loses the first finger-guessing game, Secretary Zhang puts on an “义愤填膺” face. This idiom means “with righteous indignation filling one’s breast.” However, when used in this sentence as an adjective modifying the face that he is putting on, it is far too unwieldy to write out the whole thing. Thus, one can simply cut through to the most important word in the idiom, “indignant”, and use that instead.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of all the idioms present in “The Finger-Guessing Game.” It is merely a representative sample meant to show that when translating idioms there is no one right way to do it. No pattern or template is going to give a translator the perfect translation every time. There are too many variables, from sentence structure, to tone, to who is speaking that can affect whether the translation sounds natural or not. Thus, a translator must evaluate each idiom on its own merits, and decide the best individual translation for it.

Although translating one idiom can give some insight into how to translate the next, there is no guarantee that this will be the case. It is important not to get caught up in the idea that a solution that worked for one idiom can be generalized, and thus rob the translation of much of its subtlety and accuracy.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

*The Finger-Guessing Game* is a novella with a lot of hidden meaning and subtlety. It goes without saying that conveying this to readers is extremely important, but as much of this is tied up in the way the novella is written, it can be difficult to translate it in a way that preserves these hidden meanings while still sounding natural in English. No matter how clever your translation, some of the meaning will always be lost.

Sticking to a single formula, such as translating word-for-word or strictly translating in a manner that focuses on the meaning of the words and completely ignores literal meaning, would limit the tools translators have in their arsenal, and hamper their ability to tackle each translation issue in the most effective manner. Although this method is certainly more time consuming, in the end it is worth it as it will provide the translation that best conveys the meaning, the feeling, and the hidden complexity of the original novel.

Although the translation issues raised in this thesis pertain specifically to “The Finger-Guessing Game,” the principle of tackling every translation problem in the way that suits it best rather than relying on a specific theoretical framework is one that can be applied to the translation of all kinds of literature. The main thing to consider is who the readers of this translation will be and what their needs are, as well as what your translation goals for this project are.

This is not to say that this method will be the best one every time. For example, a literary translation of a classical novel intended for an academic audience would benefit from strictly adhering to a literal translation philosophy, as the people reading it are likely going to be doing academic work on the novel, and thus a version as close to the original as possible will make their thoughts on it more accurate. Similarly, a translation of a work of fiction that is intended purely

for entertainment and is unlikely to receive a lot of scholarly attention should be translated in a “sense-for-sense” manner in order to create the most natural sounding - and thus most entertaining to read - version possible.

However, for a novel like “The Finger-Guessing Game,” which is a modern novel that could be read either for entertainment or for scholarly work (or both), strictly following one of these translation methods will lead to problems where either something will sound unnatural and thus be difficult to understand, or will be translated so idiomatically that some important original meaning will be lost. This holds true not only for this novel, but for many modern works that are just as likely to be read for pleasure as they are to be read in the classroom.

Thus, the method of handling each individual translation problem in its own unique way is adaptable to a wide range of literary translation. In this way, as little as possible of the original meaning is lost while the novel still reads naturally and fluently. This will allow people who do not speak the language that the source text is written in to experience both the enjoyment of reading these works, and the deeper meanings hidden within.

APPENDIX A  
THE FINGER-GUESSING GAME

1

Pharmacist Xiao Ke pushed his turtle shell glasses up onto the bridge of his nose and stepped out of the guard room after a full day of work. He suddenly remembered the dinner plans he had made that morning, and so without wasting any time he called his wife, Cong Rong, asking her to wait outside the restaurant beside Huang Temple Street.

She looked at her watch. It was already five o'clock. "Are you serious?" she grumbled. "That's not even enough time for me to change and put on makeup."

Xiao Ke grinned cheekily and said, "Your stomach is sticking out so much, there's no need to worry about it. In any case, Xia Shang is an old friend, he knows you used to be beautiful."

"I know you think I'm ugly," Cong Rong said unhappily. "I won't go, so you don't lose face."

Xiao Ke's house was at the Old West Gate and was only about a fifteen-minute walk from the restaurant. I had already been waiting there for five or six minutes when Cong Rong appeared before me. It still wasn't completely obvious that she was pregnant, but she finally had to hide it a little. She wore loose fitting clothing which covered up her belly quite well. As she got out of the taxi, she saw me standing there. She seemed surprised.

"Where's Xiao Ke?" she asked. "Why isn't he here yet?"

"He might have gotten stuck in traffic," I said.

"It's raining out, let's go inside," said Cong Rong.

We went inside and found a small table for four, drinking tea as we waited for Xiao Ke. But it got later and later, and he still did not come. At six o'clock I excused myself and stepped

outside to talk with Chang Xiaodong, who I had arranged to meet earlier, and gave him a few journals that he needed, after which I once again returned to the table. As I sat down, I noticed that Cong Rong was a bit uneasy.

“He’s so late,” she said, “did something happen to him?”

“Of course not,” I laughed. “What could have happened to him?”

“You wait till he gets here,” said Cong Rong, “then I’ll let him have it.”

“Yeah, punish him by making him drink,” I said.

“Wouldn’t that be more like a reward?”

“Then make him buy you something fancy.”

“That would work.” Cong Rong was rather satisfied with this suggestion, but then she hesitantly said, “I’m going to be a mom soon, how can I buy clothes?”

“All right then, how about this: make Xiao Ke buy you a scarf.” I felt a bit uneasy after I said this, because in the past it hadn’t been Xiao Ke who had bought her a scarf, it had been me. Women generally like a certain kind of accessory, and Cong Rong was particularly smitten by any kind of scarf. If Cong Rong saw that there was something off about me, she would definitely think of things past.

My cell phone rang in an extremely timely fashion. Hua Zhi said that he was returning to Pudong tomorrow. His parents lived in the same new housing development as me: I lived in the third village, they lived in the sixth. He said that if I was free, we should find a place to chat, and see if Chang Xiaodong could join us. When I closed the phone I said, “I’m a bit hungry, let’s get some appetizers.”

Cong Rong nodded, then looked at me and said, “Bring me another black tea with milk.”

Black tea with milk was another thing that Cong Rong liked. I thought to myself, *I can't stay here long. If Xiao Ke doesn't come at all, what am I going to do being left here with Cong Rong?* This was absolutely not a situation that I had planned for. Originally, I had arranged to meet with Xiao Ke because there was a matter I wanted his help with. Of course, I knew he would bring Cong Rong, my friend liked to bring his wife to any occasion in order to show her off. In modern times, if you want to know a man's status you can often look at what kind of woman is standing by his side. A woman like Cong Rong would make people think Xiao Ke was a god. She was the most beautiful woman in my social circle. Each time I saw her face a light sorrow arose within me. It had already been several years since the last time we were alone together, and now this time, sitting there facing each other, she was already another man's wife, and I had a wife of my own. What was there to be said?

My phone rang again, breaking the silence. I flipped it open and heard an unfamiliar male voice.

“Excuse me, are you Xiao Ke's friend Xia Shang?”

Upon hearing an affirmative response, the man continued, “This is the Third Public Security Bureau, can you let Xiao Ke's loved one have the phone please?”

I gave the phone to Cong Rong and watched as her face slowly fell.

2

Officer A and Officer B stood before Pharmacist Xiao Ke just as he stepped down the stone steps of the guard room and prepared to hail a taxi. His hospital was in Pudong, across Nanpu Bridge and past South Henan Road, so you could quickly get to Huangpu Temple Restaurant. He

looked at his watch and saw that time was a bit tight, but when he looked up, he saw a pair of police officers with large hats in front of him.

Before he had even recovered from his shock, Pharmacist Xiao Ke had already been brought to the road by the officers. He of course wanted to know why and so, not without some hostility, he asked, “Why are you taking me with you?”

Officer A replied, “Wait a bit and find out.”

Xiao Ke defended himself, saying, “I haven’t done anything, you’ve got the wrong guy!”

Officer B said, “We never said you did anything, but we’re going to have to ask you to cooperate and understand the situation. If we thought you were a criminal, we wouldn’t be doing it this way would we? Can’t you see that we haven’t cuffed you?”

Xiao Ke looked all around him and saw his coworkers who were leaving for the day looking at him strangely and suspiciously. He stomped his foot down hard and did not move.

“No. If you don’t tell me clearly what’s going on, I’m not going anywhere.”

Officer B saw his determination, and said in a low voice, “Someone has turned you in, you have to go.”

“What have I done? Who turned me in?”

“If you come with us, you’ll find out.”

Xiao Ke used his middle finger to push his glasses up his nose. “I have always been a law-abiding citizen, but it seems like you doubt that.”

As they walked Pharmacist wracked his brain. The three of them walked for fifteen minutes, and Xiao Ke felt more and more like he had been treated unjustly. He absolutely could not remember having ever done anything wrong. He looked at his watch. The time told him that Xia Shang was already waiting for him at the restaurant, and Cong Rong had probably also arrived,



the two of them staring at Fuyou Road with eyes filled with longing. He was a little agitated. On the one hand he was sorry to his friend, on the other hand he felt a bit uneasy. He knew that if he didn't make it to dinner tonight, the ones raising a glass and drinking together would be Xia Shang and Xiao Ke. He felt some discomfort in his chest, and so he stopped again. At this point they had already arrived at the entrance to the Public Security Bureau. Xiao Ke turned his head and said to the two officers behind him, "I'm all stuffed up, can I yell to clear my throat?"

The two officers looked at him strangely, but Pharmacist Xiao Ke was already yelling loudly.

"I fu-"

The two officers beside him could see from the shape of his mouth what he was going to say next. Officer B grasped his truncheon and prepared to hit him with it when he finished his sentence, but Xiao Ke suddenly stopped. He put his head down with a "Pah!" and immediately started walking towards the gate with long strides.

Officer B got ready to chase him, but Officer A grabbed his shoulder. Officer B scolded him, "This kid is crazy!"

"Young people have too much spleen," said Officer A, laughing and shaking his head, motioning him to not bother.

Pharmacist Xiao Ke heard the conversation behind him and went inside with great strides and an expressionless face. Officer A said, "Wrong, go left."

Officer B finally couldn't help but scold him, "We're running so fast just to catch a dead man."

Pharmacist Xiao Ke turned his head and laughed forcefully, "When you talk like that I don't know if you mean the dead man on the right or the dead man on the left."

Officer B didn't hear his partner try to dissuade him, he rushed forward heavily to knock Xiao Ke to the ground, but Pharmacist Xiao Ke held firm, shaking his head. This was a vivid tableau indeed. Xiao Ke inwardly admired himself. He had never thought he had so much self-control. "You're welcome to try again," he said slowly.

Officer B indeed heard his instructions, but this time he didn't try to knock him over, instead he punched him. Xiao Ke felt like his chest had been broken open, and that there was a fist exploring around inside his chest cavity and getting stuck between his bones. He unconsciously used his hands to guard himself and sank down to the floor.

After a while he stood up and fixed his gaze on Officer A, asking, "What was it you said before? Go left? Ok, I'll go left."

Pharmacist Xiao Ke turned to the left. He knew that Officer B was out of luck, because when he had looked right, he saw a familiar looking middle-aged police sergeant coming towards them. He suddenly remembered, several days ago this man had appeared on a TV legal drama about a recently solved homicide. He was the commissioner of this bureau. Xiao Ke believed he must have seen what happened, and sure enough he heard a loud shout. "Jia Xiaoyong, after work come to my office."

Jia Xiaoyong was Officer B. Xiao Ke turned his head again and saw that Officer B had a gloomy look on his face. It seemed like he wanted to defend himself, but nothing came out of his mouth.

The middle-aged man waved his hand and said, "I saw it all, it was right in front of me."

Finally, Xiao Ke walked calmly to the left. Officer A followed closely behind and guided him into a large room where there were already someone waiting to interrogate him. He was a young man with bushy eyebrows, and of course beside him was a woman ready to record the

interrogation. Xiao Ke sat facing them. The light was a bit too bright, so he shut his eyes and again thought of that man and that woman in the restaurant. He thought, *What do you even call this situation? If I had known that this would happen, I never would have called Cong Rong. Because of this, I've given an old pair of lovebirds another chance.*

3

The Public Security Bureau's call brought massive changes to Cong Rong's pretty face. I could tell from the crease in her forehead that something wasn't right. "What happened?" I asked.

She shook her head to show that she still wasn't sure. "The Public Security Bureau is asking for his family members to send clothes. It seems like Xiao Ke committed a crime."

I turned pale with fright. "How is that possible?"

Cong Rong laughed bitterly. "I need to go."

"I'll go with you and help you carry things."

Her bitter laugh appeared again, but she didn't protest. "Thank you," she said softly.

Cong Rong and I had met because of Xiao Ke. It had been a few years before, when I still worked at a chemical company in Pudong. A few of the nearby work units would often hold activities to strengthen the bonds between them. Xiao Ke was the deputy secretary of this committee, and his hospital had organized a large-scale dance held in the multipurpose room in the top floor of the huge hospital building. Besides my work unit, the staff of a harbor machinery plant and a kindergarten had also been invited.

Cong Rong was a teacher at that kindergarten, having graduated from Xingshi Teacher-Training School not long before. She was a good singer and a great dancer. Even though there were a lot of pretty girls there that night (mostly secretaries and kindergarten teachers), Cong Rong still stood out from the crowd. Even though I couldn't really dance, I couldn't help but ask her for

one. When we got to the dancefloor, I found that I could only walk back and forth, my steps having no order to them. At the same time, the dance we were doing was called the swaying two-step, which was a kind of dance that brought a bit of ambiguous closeness. Cong Rong and I had obviously not yet reached the kind of intimacy required for this dance, so she was unhappy. She clearly thought that I was trying to take advantage of her, and her initially jubilant visage darkened. As soon as the song was over, she left me and walked directly back to her own seat. All the other young men accompanied their partners back to their original places, it was only me who stood there all alone. Fortunately, no one was paying attention to me, and so I gloomily made my way up to the balcony.

If the story had stopped there, then I wouldn't really have any connection to Cong Rong at all. But after I had been out there for a while, Cong Rong also came up to the balcony suddenly. She had peeled a tangerine and was eating it while spitting the seeds into her other hand. She obviously did not know that I would be out there, and so we couldn't help but be a little awkward. But I laughed and explained the situation to her. My laughter was simple and unfeigned, and her wariness towards me suddenly disappeared, and she laughed back. We then began to talk casually, and later she finally tried to confirm her suspicions.

“You can't dance but you still asked me to, that takes guts.”

“I had no choice, it was the only way to meet you,” I said helplessly.

She laughed prettily and said, “Why did you so desperately have to meet me? There are lots of pretty girls here today.”

“You already know.” I said.

She started to press me. “No, I don't.”

Looking at her smiling face, I was a little shy. I could only say, “I think you’re more beautiful than all of them.” Her cheeks reddened. Even though she knew what I was going to say, and moreover she had forced me to say it, her face was still turning red. Her bashfulness was touching, and my heart couldn’t help but flutter. I blurted out, “I want to go dancing again tomorrow, me and you. Let’s go to Puxi, ok?”

She didn’t say no, she didn’t say yes, instead she said, “You still won’t know how to dance.” I immediately understood her meaning. She was willing to go with me, but she feared that I wouldn’t be able to dance. “Then let’s go to a karaoke bar,” I said, “I can sing pretty well.” She nodded. Even though her nod wasn’t that willing, you have to let women leave a little room for restraint.

Therefore, by any account my meeting with Cong Rong was Xiao Ke’s doing. If he hadn’t organized that dance, we probably never would have met. Of course, you could say that if that dance had not happened, we could have met at another, but there’s no use in saying so. I don’t want to write off the part that Xiao Ke played in all this. Of course, he would later take Cong Rong to be his wife, a little bit like being raised up by Xiao He and then let fall by Xiao He, but that was all later.

When I met Cong Rong, I wasn’t called “Xia Shang” yet. I still used my original name, Xia Wenyu. This shows that I met Cong Rong relatively early. I used my original name when I published a piece of prose in the 5th volume of the 1989 *Jiannan Literature Magazine*. That really was my maiden work. The first time I used my pen name to publish a novel was in 1991’s 5th *Seed*. That was a short story called “Young Bolshevik”, a poor work that makes me brood on and regret its chaotic values. At one time, Cong Rong called me by my original name, sometimes even going so far as to affectionately call me Wenyu. Later, things finished between us, and although

we were still friends, she would still call me that but add my surname to it. After that, we had few chances to see each other, and she started to call me Xia Shang like everyone else in our social circle. Indeed, there are less and less people these days who call me by my original name. This is just like my writer friends Chang Xiaodong and Hua Zhi. Who knows that their real names are Chen Xiaojin and Li Daxin?

4

Xiao Ke sat facing the interrogator. Inside he was in turmoil, after all as far as he was concerned this was the first time something this bad had happened to him. But he still appeared calm. He gazed single mindedly into the young man with the bushy eyebrows' eyes. He inwardly warned himself that he absolutely could not be the first to blink. This was psychological warfare. He had read books about this. He thought that even if he really had broken the law, he would still want to have a good start. But he did not feel very confident, and so he scolded himself, *You haven't done anything, why should you be afraid?*

His pupils bore into the young man with the bushy eyebrows who sat facing him, but in the end he still lost. Under his sharp gaze his originally perfectly straight line of sight wavered embarrassingly. The young man with the bushy eyebrows laughed, and so did Xiao Ke, but with a scornful look. The twisted corners of his mouth seemed to say, "You're a professional, what we just did is something you've done a hundred times before. The only thing you beat me on is amount of practice, what is there for you to be proud of?"

Suddenly the pharmacist had a thought. What would happen if two police officers of equal training had such a staring contest? He felt for his glasses with his index finger. He was beginning

to sweat, and so he took them off, cleaned them on his shirt and placed them back on his nose. At this point he heard the young man with the bushy eyebrows' first question.

“Name?”

“Xiao Ke, male, born May 4th, 1967, married, pharmacist at Pudong 4th Hospital, I live at Jinjia Lane, Old West Gate...”

“I didn't ask you to tell me that much with one breath. Just answer what I ask you, slowly. Sex?”

“Female,” said Pharmacist Xiao Ke.

The young man with the bushy eyebrows glanced at him, and then turned to the woman taking notes who nodded at him. Xiao Ke saw her write down something.

“You are responsible for everything that you say. Age?”

Pharmacist Xiao Ke knew he had met his match and began to answer his interrogator's questions honestly.

“I was born on May 4th, 1967. Also, I'm a man.”

“We could already see that.”

“Then change what you just wrote down.”

“I wrote that you're a man,” said the woman.

“Where do you live?”

“Old West Gate, Jinjia Lane, North 3rd Street, number 9, 2nd floor.”

“Place of business?”

“Pudong 4th Hospital.”

“Occupation?”

“Pharmacist.”

...

...

“Do you know this person?” The real questioning had finally begun. The woman walked over and placed a photograph in front of him.

Pharmacist Xiao Ke casually pushed his glasses up onto his nose and saw that in the photograph was a beautiful woman. She seemed to be about 20, maybe 25. It was difficult to guess the age of someone that young. He lifted his head, “I don’t know her. Who is she?”

“Think again carefully, don’t jump to conclusions,” said the young man with the bushy eyebrows.

Xiao Ke once again focused his attention on the photograph. After looking at it for a while, he shook his head again. “I’m sorry, I have no idea who this is.”

“Think again.”

“I don’t know her. Should I know her? If I don’t know her, can’t you let me go?”

The young man with the bushy eyebrows looked at the man sitting across from him, and his face fell. After a brief silence, he said, “Think again carefully.” His tone was much more serious than before.

“I already said I don’t know her. If you think I broke the law, then arrest me. Stop going in circles,” Xiao Ke shouted.

“We obviously arrested you because someone turned you in, but we had hoped that you would confess on your own, alright? Fine, think about it. We’ll find another time to talk.”

Officer A entered the room from outside the door and prepared to take Xiao Ke away, but the young man with the bushy eyebrows suddenly said, “Wait a moment. Xiao Ke, is this yours?”



He held in his fingers a dull yellow name card. Xiao Ke looked at it and nodded his head in admittance.

“That was my name card. I used it two years ago, yes.”

“At that time, you were deputy secretary?”

“Yes.”

“Then you must have gone to a lot of social events.”

“Some, but not that many.”

“And you must have met a lot of women, like the one in the photo.”

“I have no idea.”

“But she remembers you very clearly.”

“She must have mistaken me for someone else.”

“Then why did she have your name card?”

“What did she do?”

“You can probably guess.”

Xiao Ke suddenly understood everything. He felt a stab of humiliation and shouted, “What do you take me for? I know, I know everything. How can you arrest me based on only a photograph? I absolutely do not know this woman. Why would I know a woman like that?”

5

Cong Rong and I sat in the guard room of the public security bureau, next to a bag of clothes. An old police officer came out to admit us and asked us what relationship we had to Xiao Ke. I said I was his friend. Cong Rong said she was his sister and then immediately asked, “What has my brother done?”

The old police officer said, “I’m really not sure, but it was something shady.”

“No way,” I cut in, “Xiao Ke has always been a law-abiding citizen. He’s even a Party member.”

“So what? There aren’t any bad guys in the Party?” The old police officer had a disdainful look on his face. “To tell you the truth, either way this Party member is a criminal.”

“What do you mean?” asked Cong Rong.

“What do I mean? A woman turned your brother in. A hooker.”

I watched as a single tear fell from Cong Rong’s limpid eyes. She stood up, turned her face away, and ran towards the door.

By the time I had dealt with the bag of clothes and followed her, Cong Rong had already disappeared without a trace.

I stood in the doorway of the public security bureau, staring blankly. I didn’t know whether or not I should go to Cong Rong’s house at Jinjia Lane in Old West Gate. But if I went, what could I say? Call Xiao Ke a lecher? For a former lover to stand in front of her and say that her husband’s behavior was unacceptable would be a little too much.

At this time, Chang Xiaodong called me to say that one of the journals I had given him was wrong. The one he wanted was “Li Jiang River,” but the one I had given him was “Mountain Flower.” Also, last night he had received a message from Jizi Prison. Our friend Jiang wanted us to come see him.

“What are you doing now?” he asked.

I thought for a moment and said, “I guess I’m not doing anything. Alright, I’ll come visit you first.”

Chang Xiaodong’s place was near Hongqiao, not far from the airport. After I had sat down, I looked at the letter that Jiang had written. This friend of mine had been put in prison because of

a woman. A call girl had turned him in after being arrested, and he was sentenced to three years in prison. This made me think of Xiao Ke, sitting in the public security bureau at that very moment. I told Chang Xiaodong about what had happened today. He didn't know Xiao Ke, but upon hearing about it, it seemed that he was a bit worried for my friend. I sighed. Why had there been so many affairs with prostitutes recently?

Afterwards we talked about other things, but Cong Rong's face kept appearing before my eyes, always crying. This left me terribly upset. If I had been a little bit rational all those years ago, Cong Rong would be my wife now. Of course, there was no point in saying this. Such is the way of the world, and there is absolutely no way to start over again.

Cong Rong had often hinted that Xiao Ke was pursuing her, but I never paid it any attention, essentially laughing it off. This isn't to say that Xiao Ke didn't have a chance against me, in reality he was an outstanding young man and I had always greatly respected him. The reason why I wasn't bothered was very personalized. Cong Rong was already mine. I thought everyone understood what that meant.

Cong Rong was a very traditional woman. After she had told about that she cried. I had originally thought to marry her earlier, but marriage requires a lot of money. Even though Cong Rong said we didn't have to be so extravagant, I cared too much about appearances. And so, I kept putting it off.

Under these circumstances, I never thought that Cong Rong would go see a movie with Xiao Ke, and that I would run into them. On that day I had just passed Milky Way Theater, which was not far from her house, when I saw Cong Rong and Xiao Ke together among the crowd of people pouring out of the theater. I was dumbfounded.

Afterwards Cong Rong explained that Xiao Ke had stood outside her kindergarten and waited for her with two movie tickets. She was actually quite embarrassed and had no choice but to accompany him to the theater. I stormed and raged, saying, “How can you go and see a movie alone with another man? How can you expect me to believe this was just a coincidence?” Cong Rong cried. Afterwards, she said, “If we were already married, I could have rightly and properly refused him. But...”

Chang Xiaodong saw me spacing out, and so reminded me by saying, “Are you ready? Are you going or not?”

He was asking if I was going to the prison where Jiang was.

“Let’s go see him,” I said.

After leaving Chang Xiaodong’s place, I went back to my own little nest in Pudong. On the way I gave Cong Rong several phone calls, but she didn’t answer any of them. I thought that she must have gone back to her parent’s house, but to my surprise I found her downstairs from our apartment.

Her face was filled with tears. I found a nearby coffee shop and we sat down, as I watched her cry heavily. I thought about what I could say to her. But there was nothing.

6

Xiao Ke was locked up, and though he strained his vocal cords abusing everyone around him, no one paid him any mind. He crouched down on the ground and discovered that there was someone else in the room with him, wearing the same tortoise shell glasses as him, and with the expression on his face exactly the same as his own. He stared blankly, holding up his glasses frames with his hand, and the man in there with him did the same. He walked over and discovered that it was just his reflection in the iron sheet that acted as a window.

Where was Cong Rong right now? Xiao Ke leaned back against the wall and once again began to consider this question. As far as he was concerned, he had good reason to worry, after all Xia Shang was Cong Rong's first love. Xiao Ke and Xia Shang were only casual friends, and they also were rivals in love, so their friendship hadn't really gone anywhere. This situation was common enough.

Xia Shang had asked Xiao Ke for help this time because his father was responsible for health and safety in the New District of Pudong. Xia Shang had set up an advertisement company, and there was a foreign dairy commission that wanted to import a type of powdered milk into the hospital and have them recommend it for pregnant mothers. This would be much more effective than TV advertisements. Xia Shang thought that the dietary needs of babies were very important, and so had done extensive research on the subject. He understood that for powdered milk you should obtain certification from an American or European food safety testing institution, since the quality of overseas products was well-known. Even though it would be quite a bit more expensive than domestic powdered milk, the nutritional value and safety would be assured. Using public power to open up this channel of communication violated the fairness of a market economy but giving new mothers who could not produce enough milk one more option did not seem like a bad thing at all. And what was more, that dairy company had promised that the products would be the same as used in their own countries. They would not give Chinese babies inferior quality powdered milk. This promise had let Xia Shang make up his mind, and so he sought Xiao Ke's help. And of course, Xiao Ke would receive a commission afterwards. The benefit was right in front of him. Xiao Ke had responded but had not yet sat down to talk about it, as he had been locked up.

Pharmacist Xiao Ke once again looked around him. The room was very small, the iron sheet window gave a shaky false impression that it was larger than it really was. Instead of a wooden gate the door was made of iron bars.

He started to yell again, and this time someone actually came. It was a bald, middle-aged man, followed by a police officer. The iron bars swung open. The bald, middle-aged man's gait was unsteady, possibly because he was overweight. He sat down facing Xiao Ke and laughed bitterly. It was already dark outside. As Xiao Ke stared at that bald head, the man seemed to be closing his eyes. After a little while, the fat man began to snore. Xiao Ke paced uneasily, but the room was too small, and after a few steps he would have to turn around. But still he paced without stopping, like a caged beast.

It was already nine o'clock when Xiao Ke received the bag of clothes that we had brought for him. He did not see Cong Rong. He had already eaten dinner at this point, a box of meat and vegetables with rice. There was one piece of meat on top, a soy egg and a little bit of vegetable, market price around 5 yuan.

At some point before midnight, one after another six more people were brought into the cell. Including Xiao Ke, there were seven total. After talking to them he learned that they all had been taken into custody because of that woman in the photograph. Besides Pharmacist Xiao Ke, there was a publisher named Song, the bald, middle-aged man who had been put in the cell earlier; a secretary at a power plant named Zhang, a slippery fellow who liked to talk; a salesman at a roasted nut bakery named Wang, who didn't say much and liked to bite his nails; a professor named Ge, who was fond of lecturing people with great floods of eloquence; a trademark purchasing agent named Tang, who had just returned from a business trip, and upon entering the cell yawned

incessantly then hugged a torn quilt from who knows where and fell asleep; and a boatman named Yu, who's dark skin and bell-like voice could not be described with ordinary words.

Each of the seven men's expressions were different under the night light, but as they entered the room, they each, without exception, unintentionally revealed their gloomy mood. They quickly started to ask each other why they had been locked up, and when they heard that it was all for the same reason, their attitude changed. Pharmacist Xiao Ke's face twitched sporadically, and he noticed that the others' attitudes were also expressed in their own ways. Some were surprised, some were indifferent, but most unexpected was that one of them seemed to be taking pleasure in their misfortune. This was Professor Ge

Everyone looked at each other as they heard Professor Ge's laughter. They didn't understand why he was laughing. They didn't think being casually tossed in prison was a laughing matter.

Professor Ge laughed and pointed at each of them in turn. His eyes were running with tears. "I see why you all look so familiar," he said. "We've all met before."

Secretary Zhang was the first to answer. He tacitly said to Professor Ge, "I recognize you too, it's simply hard to believe we'd meet here."

"Do we really know each other," said Boatman Yu, examining Professor Ge carefully. He scratched the back of his head. "I don't remember you at all."

Pharmacist Xiao Ke could hardly suppress his smile, and finally snorted with laughter. "Don't you understand what they're saying?" he said. "They're saying that our cocks have met."

Boatman Yu recovered from his surprise. "I'm just a thick, uneducated person. How could I understand such high-class speech?"

Professor Ge laughed and said, "Don't worry, don't worry. I know you're thick."

Everyone exploded with laughter, with Boatman Yu's simple-minded laugh following soon after. His cheeks reddened and he said, "You're thick too! You're thick." Everyone laughed harder.

"This damn room," someone said, "You can't even see the moonlight."

What this meant was: we were locked up in such an odious situation, but we still laughed like nothing was wrong. It was Publisher Song who said this.

"You said it." Professor Ge looked around at everyone and said, "Who knows the girl in the photograph?"

Everyone looked at each other, but their expressions said they didn't.

"What about you? Come clean, were you with her?" Secretary Zhang asked him.

"I knew you would turn this back on me. Shut up. Yes, I know her."

As he said this, everyone stretched their heads closer. "As a matter of fact, that girl was a student at our school. I often taught her class," said Professor Ge.

"So that's how it is. So, you're the pavilion closest to the water that gets the moonlight first," said Agent Tang, who had not spoken before, from his quilt. He seemed to be sleeping, but his mouth and ears were not shut.

Professor Ge looked to the corner of the room. "Even if I had wanted to, I didn't have the guts. For a teacher and a student to sleep together, that's horrible."

"Oh, so a student and a teacher sleeping together is pretty rare, huh? Come on." said Secretary Zhang.

"If you didn't do anything with that girl, then why were you arrested?" asked Boatman Yu.

"It's because of that damn name card."



“What does a name card even prove? As long as you’re not the fucking prime minister anyone on the street can print one out.”

“The problem is, those name cards really are ours. If that woman keeps on saying that she slept with you, what can you do? This kind of thing is just a secret transaction between two people. If she sinks her teeth into you, even jumping into the Yellow River wouldn’t wash the suspicion away.”

7

In the coffee shop, Cong Rong and I sat silently facing each other. Indeed, there was nothing I could say to her, because I had no intentions towards her, and *could* have no intention towards her. Even though we had been lovers, this had already become a past that was hard to look back on. She also understood this. Even though I still felt some attachment to her, I still could not condemn her husband. If I did, I would be saying that Cong Rong had married wrong, that her marriage was a mistake, because Xiao Ke was a scoundrel. But then what would that make me? With this background I could not play the role of the man of honor. I had my own desire, even here in this coffee shop, under the dim and moody lighting, seeing her delicate and lovely bearing still led me to wild fantasies. But I still understood that she could never be mine. No silk scarf could ever again bring any connection between us. On any level, love was like movies or literature, full of sorrow. Without question, I was the wrong person for Cong Rong to confide in. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to help her, it may be that at that time I wanted to help her more than anyone else. But I really did not know what to say, so much so that I must have seemed even more ashamed than her, and even more uneasy.

Cong Rong was a smart woman; she must have known the reason for my silence. She didn't ask me to say anything, and at the same time said nothing herself. Her sobbing finally stopped. "I see it clearly now," she said. "I know what I should do."

I started at her words and looked at her face carefully. But she avoided my gaze, saying, "Thank you, Xia Shang, for staying with me for so long."

I suddenly noticed the time. It was already two in the morning.

She left the couch and headed outside. I quickly paid for our coffee and followed her. The road was empty, almost nobody was there. Looking at her back in the moonlight, she looked particularly lonely, particularly fragile. I followed behind her and lowered my head. In the light from the streetlamps her shadow was stretched out and shortened. We walked for a bit, and then she stopped, turned to me and said, "Why don't you go home first?"

"It's too late, I'll walk you back," I said.

"No need." She held out her hand to signal a taxi. She got into the backseat and waved at me. "I'm alright, you should get back quickly," she said.

She closed the door, and the taxi sped away.

8

As Xiao Ke and the others were talking, they were interrupted several times by the outside world. Someone would call one of their names, and after being registered they would get a bag of clothes. This meant that they would have to stay there for a while. Everyone in the room was in low spirits, which led to a small episode happening later. It was something like this: Roasted Nuts Bakery Salesman Wang was the only one who had not received bedclothes from his family, so he in particular seemed uneasy and irritable. Thus, when the police officers brought Boatman Yu his bag of clothes, he could not help but quarrel with them. He brought up a law, saying they could

not hold them here for more than 24 hours and he hoped that he could be released by the evening of the next day. The police officer's response to this was affirmative, and he suddenly made a decision that surprised everyone. He said to Salesman Wang, "You can go now, I'll walk you out." Nobody could guess the officer's intention, until finally Secretary Zhang scratched his head and told everyone his opinion on this matter. Everyone thought that it was reasonable and quieted down to see how it would play out. After about half an hour, Salesman Wang once again appeared in front of everyone. He described his experiences after being taken away by the officer, and it was pretty close to what Secretary Zhang had guessed.

"That officer took me outside the door to the police station and said to me, 'You're free now.' I looked at him, and he said, 'What are you staring at? You can go.' Then I started to walk forward out onto the road. I really thought that I was free, and I started to run. But a motorcycle pursued me from behind and stopped in front of me. It was that police officer again. He said to me, 'Get on.' I just got on his motorcycle and he turned back onto the original road. When we got off the bike he said, "You've already been outside. Starting from now you will lose your freedom for the next twenty-four hours. If your case hasn't been solved in the next twenty-four hours, feel free to bring up your rights again."

Pharmacist Xiao Ke thought the whole time. There were several thoughts that stirred in his mind and made him uneasy. He tried to uncover his connection with the woman in the photograph, even if it had just been a passing meeting. He conjured up many scenes: a coffee shop, a musical tea salon, various snack stands, a subway station, even the escalator in a department store. But he could not place the woman in the corresponding place. Her image was nowhere to be found in his mind. His head was about to split.

What was Cong Rong doing at this very moment? She probably already knew why he had been locked up. It seemed as if Xiao Ke could see her standing before him, glaring at him. He ran his hand through his hair. He didn't know how to explain this to her. Would she think that she herself was blameless? He probably had already lost the opportunity to explain.

Pharmacist Xiao Ke sized up the people around him. He didn't understand them at all. He was sure that there was one among them who had had an affair with the woman in the photograph, but he couldn't decide who it was. When the water subsided, the rocks would emerge. But before that person was truly exposed, everyone was worthy of suspicion, even himself.

That night, the seven of them lay down to sleep. Literary Editor Song told everybody that several years before he had interviewed some hoodlums who slept on the streets. They called this way of sleeping, "air-drying the salted hairtail." He had never thought that today he himself would be air-dried. He sighed deeply, turned over and seemed to fall asleep.

9

As I watched the cab speed away, I thought, why did Cong Rong pretend to be Xiao Ke's sister? Could it be that she had some sort of premonition? If not, what explanation could there be for her actions? Cong Rong was sensitive, as women naturally are, and it was just like all those years ago when, because of a letter sent from our own city, she finally left me. That letter wasn't actually of the nature that she imagined it to be. But it indeed came from a woman's hand, and so I purposely did not let her see it. But this was only to get a little revenge for her past transgression. Since you can go and see a movie with another man, how can you say that I can't keep in touch with another woman? I indeed wanted to bring about this sort of effect, but not long after I discovered that I had made a mistake. She took it seriously, that is to say, she didn't think it was false or that I was playing a trick on her. That letter was actually just my editor's draft notes, but

whenever I was in her presence, I would secretly lock it in my drawer, and purposely adopt a furtive countenance. She noticed this, and firmly believed I had another woman. Since she had gone to the movies with another man, her boyfriend had gone and seduced another woman. Later, she gradually began to draw away from me, until one day she called me and said, “I’m going to France, we should break up.”

I was shocked. It was already too late to salvage the situation. I put down the receiver and felt a void in my heart.

I thought that she would settle down in France, it was only later that I learned she had only gone there to visit a relative; one of her uncles was a civil engineer in Paris. Two months later she returned to Shanghai, and she never again tried to contact me, until one day I received an invitation. She and Xiao Ke had already made wedding reservations at Yangzhou Restaurant. At that occasion, I “forded” through more than two hours. The reason I use the word “forded” is because it seemed as if I was in the midst of boundless water. I desperately tried to swim to the other side of my time there, but I did not have even the smallest amount of strength. How many times I must have thought of leaving early? But if I did that, then what would have been the point of coming? Why did I come? It was for humiliation. Not the bride’s humiliation, nor the groom’s, it was for me to humiliate myself. Everyone should experience this kind of scene once or twice. It will do you good for the rest of your life.

10

They passed through a sleepless night and starting in the morning the seven detained men were questioned in succession. This lasted until noon, and each time someone returned to that little room they could see their own exhaustion and depression on each other’s faces. Everyone cursed the woman in the photograph. They all spoke with one voice, saying that they were innocent,

asking why that woman wanted to slander them. If only because she had smashed her jar when it was already broken, not caring that she had added a few more cracks, that was still too dastardly, probably a hundred times more dastardly than her profession.

Trademark Agent Tang came back with some news. As he was going through the process of being questioned, he had gone to the bathroom. There he had overheard two police officers sitting on the toilet and talking. This prostitution case had seen more than twenty people be arrested. Even the bureau found it to be a headache, that call girl had brought in a huge stack of name cards, from people of all walks of life, all of them men. That woman had admitted that she had gone to bed with all of them, which meant that they had to lock up all of the remaining people one by one, and hadn't this become a joke?

Everyone listened to this episode and kept silent, but their indignation was clear on their faces. Afterwards, Professor Ge said, "In any case, it's not clear if this is true or not. Think about it, there are so many name cards. There must be one among us who really was with her, and there certainly also must be those who are wrongfully accused. That woman probably isn't clear herself. She's a professional. She's had so many cocks inside her how can she be expected to remember them all? It's just like a female fruit-monger. How can she be sure of which of all the men on the street have bought her bananas?"

Secretary Zhang laughed and said, "Maybe that fruit-monger hasn't sold many bananas, but she's certainly eaten a few!"

Everyone in the room burst out laughing.

Secretary Zhang continued to speak. "You said that that woman was your student. When the upper beam is not straight, the lower ones will go aslant. The people gave a female student to you, but you cultivated her as a prostitute. You must be partially to blame."

Professor Ge said, “If you are sleeping with a prostitute, you can’t ask if she’s a student or not, although some prostitutes use students’ names in order to solicit customers.”

Secretary Zhang asked suspiciously, “You really never bedded her?”

Professor Ge said, “No, why the fuck would I lie to you?”

Secretary Zhang said, “At any rate, there is certainly one among us who had a relationship with that woman. I really want to know who it was that caused us to be locked up like this. When this is all cleared up, I’m going to have to cut his cock off.”

“Right, cripple him. Damn, this has been hard for me. Not eating fish for so long isn’t good for you.” The boat captain’s loud voice filled the room like a large bell ringing.

Professor Ge said, “There’s no need for you to be that way, let me tell you a joke about a kindergarten teacher.”

As Professor Ge told his dirty joke in high spirits, Xiao Ke’s gaze met that of Literary Editor Song by chance. They stared at each other from across the room for a while, until they finally tore their eyes away. Pharmacist Xiao Ke continually observed the others in the room to see who among them was the real john, and he guessed that Literary Editor Song was doing the same. Finally, their eyes met again, and they laughed a bit awkwardly. They had a tacit understanding of one another.

In this particular space, who could not be suspicious of each other? Xiao Ke pondered.

Pharmacist Xiao Ke and Literary Editor Song laughed with everyone else, but they took little pleasure from this laughter. The reason that he laughed was only to cover up the turmoil in his heart. He hoped to not stand out from the others.

His laughter was extremely short, because the kindergarten teacher in Professor Ge’s joke made him think of his own wife. What was Cong Rong doing right now? His eyebrows gradually

bunched together. At this time, Secretary Zhang suggested that everyone play the finger-guessing game.

11

As Xiao Ke was in that room filled with melancholy, Chang Xiaodong and I were across the river in some Pudong restaurant, describing our experience of going to Zhoupu to visit Jiang that morning to Hua Zhi. Of course, while describing Jiang I was also thought of Xiao Ke. Immediately, it was as if I saw Cong Rong's broken-hearted countenance. I was a little worried that Xiao Ke would get the same sentence as Jiang. I was a bit distracted, so Chang Xiaodong, with the copy of *Li Jiang River* that I had given him that morning rolled up in his hands, went over the scene of our visit.

He said, "In order to see Jiang, I got up at 6 AM, and hurried from around Rainbow Bridge to Pudong South Wharf. Then I took a shuttle bus directly to Zhoupu. There's a plate glass factory there, and it's there where Jiang is serving his sentence. Jiang's father went with us, and at 7 AM Xia Shang showed up right on schedule by the bus station. His house isn't far from there. After that everyone got on a bus, and we drove for about an hour. We got off at a quiet stop without any signs. Jiang's father led the way, with Xia Shang and I following behind. We walked for about six or seven minutes, during which time we had to pass through a long and narrow corridor, after which was a wide expanse of crops. We saw a tall electric fence. This was the rear gate, the place for receiving the criminals' loved ones. We first used our ID cards to check in, and then waited to one side for our names to be called."

"I was a bit like a lottery drawing." I interrupted.

Chang Xiaodong laughed for a while, and then continued to speak. "The waiting process was relatively long, almost three hours. Xia Shang and I could only stroll around, and the place



wasn't big, so you couldn't go anywhere. Before long we saw a large blackboard. There was a table on it that divided up the prisoners. We found Jiang, and his number was very low, which probably meant that his work wasn't good. Xia Shang also found someone named Li Lianxin and joked that it must be Li Daxin's brother."

"Fuck," cursed Hua Zhi.

Chang Xiaodong laughed and began speaking again. "Beside that blackboard was another one, a little bit smaller, and there was also a table on it, on which was written the prisoners' financial situation: their work converted into money. And so, minus his spending, we found that Jiang's account had a bit more than 200 yuan in it, which wasn't much compared to the others. We laughed at him, because this must mean that he's a pretty poor laborer.

Xia Shang had me look at the fence. There was a guard tower beside the fence with an armed policeman in it. We gestured at the tower, calculating the possibility of climbing up there from where we were. The guard watched us closely. Jiang's father ran over to us to say that Jiang was about to come out and asked us to get ready. Xia Shang and I each took out 200 yuan and gave it to the warden, and the warden gave us our receipts. When we heard Jiang's name being called, we entered. The reception was divided into three levels. The best kind of meeting was talking face to face across a desk for a relatively long time. The next level was the same, but the time was shorter. For the worst kind, you were separated by glass panes with barbed wire in between. This was the kind of reception that we had.

Jiang came out and his long hair was gone, having been replaced with a crew cut. When he saw Xia Shang and me, he laughed awkwardly. We started talking, simply asking each other how we were doing. We hoped that he would reform his ways, after all his sentence was already half over, and freedom was right before his eyes. He said that he had once again started writing a book.

He had already written several novellas and was preparing to complete a full novel. Xia Shang and I both urged him to not write a novel for now. There are too many novels, and if it's not especially good, it won't sell well. He could obviously tell we were very agitated. He was a little thinner than he had been in the past, and his skin was a bit pale, almost a greenish color. We couldn't stare at him for too long, because that glass pane with the barbed wire skewed his face into something crooked. It was exhausting for the eyes. We talked this way for ten minutes, and just like that it was over. Jiang was taken away, but he was looking at us a bit hesitantly, as if he wanted to leave with us. Xia Shang and I didn't feel very well, and so we didn't look back at him.

Hua Zhi said, "To be able to write a book inside is actually very good. After all, he's still young, he hasn't even passed 30 yet, he can still start over. Alright, let's change the topic."

"Has that friend of yours who was locked up been released yet?" Chang Xiaodong asked me.

"I don't know, I haven't heard any news," I said.

"Who else was locked up?" asked Hua Zhi.

"A friend," I said. "You've never heard of him, he's a friend from another social circle."

12

The so called "finger-guessing game" was really just scissors-stone-cloth, a Chinese game that everyone is familiar with. Secretary Zhang said, "We will use a turn-based elimination system. The last person to be out will be assumed to be the john."

His suggestion got everyone's approval. No one opposed this game because if they did everyone would think they were guilty.

The game started with Secretary Zhang and Professor Ge. Secretary Zhang came out with scissors, while Professor Ge chose stone. Secretary Zhang lost.

But Secretary Zhang still had a chance, because Salesman Wang and Purchasing Agent Tang were off to the side about to determine their own winner. Salesman Wang used cloth to wrap up Purchasing Agent Tang's stone. Next, Purchasing Agent Tang and Secretary Zhang played, and this time Secretary Zhang won, using scissors to cut through Purchasing Agent Tang's cloth. But Purchasing Agent Tang could still play again with Pharmacist Xiao Ke, who had lost to the literary editor. In short, they formed a large circle, and in the end the two who had lost the most would be left. Between these two one would be the supposed john. These two were Salesman Wang and Boat Captain Yu. The last one to be eliminated was Boat Captain Yu, with the result that everyone started jeering, wanting him to confess whether or not getting off with the girl in the photograph was any good.

Boat Captain Yu giggled good-naturedly, his face turning red, and said resolutely, "I definitely didn't sleep with her, so how would I know if she was any good?"

"No, you must tell us the truth. I can't believe someone your age would still have such wicked desires." Secretary Zhang put on an indignant face, as if Boat Captain Yu had really become the john.

Everyone watching from the sides laughed.

Boat Captain Yu dug his heels in, saying, "Don't say that, I really didn't do it. What do you want me to say? Do I look like the kind of person who can make up a story?"

Everyone saw Boat Captain Yu's red face, which they had just caused. Boat Captain Yu said, "I'm not a sore loser, I'd love to make up a story to make everyone happy, but I'm too stupid. I can't do it, I'm afraid that's just how it is."

After eating lunch, everyone started chatting again, but Xiao Ke didn't join them. He huddled in the corner and closed his eyes as if to rest, but inside he was in turmoil. A bad feeling

was growing inside him, it seemed like something big was about to happen. He put his head between his knees so that no one could see his miserable expression. Just then, he heard footsteps stop outside the door to the cell. He lifted his head, and there was someone pulling out the keys, saying, “Yu Dahai, come out.”

Boat Captain Yu straightened up and asked, “Are you calling me?”

“Yes, you.” He continued, “Don’t forget to pick up your things.”

“Are you saying I can go?” Boat Captain Yu stood there dumbfounded.

“Do what you need to do and then let’s go.”

Boat Captain Yu began to pack up his things, and then was taken away.

Once Boat Captain Yu had left, everyone gathered together to whisper. Boat Captain Yu was the first person in the room to be let go, who would be next? Without question, each person hoped the next one would be himself.

The irony of this was that Boat Captain Yu was the one who was eliminated from scissors-stone-cloth, and therefore was the supposed john. His release produced a feeling of absurdity in everyone. Everyone gazed at each other suspiciously, as if each of them harbored some evil design.

Pharmacist Xiao Ke once again hid his head between his knees, as if this position could stop the feeling of unease inside him.

13

Chang Xiaodong, Hua Zhi and I were meeting at a Chinese restaurant, talking about how we had been recently and how we were getting on with our latest novels. We didn’t have many opportunities to meet like this, because we were usually so busy. Being busy isn’t a bad thing, although it can have some side-effects. But being busy is better than not being busy. Idleness can

easily lead to problems; everything can get out of order. Leisure is not really a good word in modern times.

My pager vibrated, numbing the skin around my waist. I pulled out the device and pressed the display button. On the screen was displayed: “I couldn’t reach your cell phone, please give me a call at my house after you receive this message. Cong Rong.”

I checked my cell phone and saw that it had run out of battery. I borrowed another one and called Cong Rong’s house. The phone rang but no one picked up. I could do nothing but wait a while, and about five minutes later I tried again. It rang, but still no one answered it. And so, I called five or six times in just over an hour. Each time it rang, but no one picked up. I thought this was very strange, and so I checked the message on my pager. This time I realized that Cong Rong was probably talking about her mother’s house. I immediately called there. It rang, and someone answered. I heard Cong Rong’s mother’s voice. I was still pretty familiar with her voice, after all she had almost become my mother-in-law.

Upon hearing my voice, she asked me how she could have not heard from me in so long, and had I forgotten about her? I had to go through the motions of reassuring her, and then I asked if Cong Rong was there. She replied, “Cong Rong left not too long ago, said she was going for a walk. Is there something wrong with her?” “No, no, not at all,” I said. “When she comes back have her give me a call.”

I hung up, and the three of us continued chatting for a while, and then we went our separate ways. I walked by myself along Dongfang Road, a bustling commercial street in Pudong. There are many streets in Pudong that take names from places in Shandong province, like Weifang Road, Jimo Road, Linyi Road, Laoshan Road, etc. When it had first opened up, Dongfang Road was called Wendeng Road. The reason why it is changed now is due to the fact that in Shanghainese

the characters “Wendeng” are pronounced like the word for “grave.” Moreover, as Pudong developed, the name “Dongfang” became extremely popular, and had surged forth in places such as Dongfang Television Station, Dongfang People’s Broadcast Station, Dongfang Pearl Television Tower, Dongfang City and Countryside Newspaper, Dongfang Business Plaza, Dongfang Aviation Company, Dongfang Hospital etc. Playing the role of Pudong’s primary commercial street at that time, the name Dongfang Road had also logically come about as the times demanded.

Leaving behind the bustling mass of people on the street, I stepped into a shop and headed for the toy department to buy a toy gun. My two-year-old son still didn’t have a toy gun. He had a lot of cars, whenever that kid saw a car, he would shout like he was going crazy, but I think that toy guns are what is suitable for boys. Who didn’t play with toy guns (or slingshots) when we were kids?

As I went up to the cashier to pay, I passed by a counter where many colorful scarves were hanging. My footsteps halted there. The scarves blurred before my eyes. Finally, I picked out one among them. It was light blue in color, like lake water, and a skin-like pattern was printed on it. It had a yielding texture, like the touch of skin that is familiar and dear. I bought it, put it in the bag with the toy gun, and left the store.

I did not receive a phone call from Cong Rong that day. That night, when I brought out the toy gun for my son to play with, our house phone rang. I hurriedly picked up the receiver, but what came out was my cousin’s bright voice. I was a bit disappointed, of course not at my cousin, but at that time if it was not Cong Rong, then anyone’s call would have left me disappointed.

Xiao Ke and the others greeted the second morning since they had been locked up the evening before last. That afternoon two more people were released. One was Roasted Nuts Bakery

Salesman Wang, and the other was Trademark Purchasing Agent Tang. What should be pointed out is that before this these two men had coincidentally just lost the finger-guessing game. The Salesman had lost that morning, and then Purchasing Agent Tang had lost an hour before he himself was released. Their mood was better than Boatman Yu's, there were no denials, and in fact they told their stories with relish. The story that Salesman Wang came up with was particularly good, owing to the fact that the content that he related was quite dirty, and didn't go into any unnecessary details.

And so, there were only four people left in the room: Professor Ge, Secretary Zhang, Literary Editor Song and Pharmacist Xiao Ke. Their feelings were plain on their faces, especially the first two. They were clearly not as lively as before. The three men who had been freed before them burdened their already weighty psychological pressure. Just like a gradually shrinking encirclement, the true criminal was about to be revealed. Tension and unease quite obviously remained on the faces of the four left-over men. "Shit," swore Secretary Zhang, "I don't even have a cigarette. Fucking hell."

That evening, Professor Ge suddenly ran a high fever, and curled up into a ball against the cold. The guard called a doctor, who was a middle-aged man wearing the same police uniform (the only difference between him and the other police officers was that he wore a white coat). After giving Professor Ge a preliminary diagnosis, he discovered signs of early-stage pneumonia, and in order to avoid infection Professor Ge was taken away. And so, there were only three people left in the room. The space no longer seemed cramped.

The three of them said goodnight, but none of them was in any mood to go back to sleep. Sometime around four in the morning, a mouse burrowed into Secretary Zhang's pant leg. He burst up into the air like an exploding firecracker, and as he fell back down his foot landed on Literary

Agent Song's heel, fracturing the bone. Pharmacist Xiao Ke heard exceedingly clearly the crisp sound of it snapping, rather like the sound of bamboo chopsticks being broken in half, piercing through the still night. He sat up in surprise and saw a dark shadow drop down before his eyes. It was Secretary Zhang who had fallen down on the ground, as Literary Editor Song's blood-curdling shrieks shattered the darkness and quiet all around.

15

On the afternoon of the third day since Xiao Ke had been arrested, I received a call from him. He told me that he had just been released, and had tried to call his house, as well as Cong Rong's mother's house, but he hadn't been able to get a hold of her. He asked me if I knew where she was.

"I don't know," I said. It's not my fault I don't know where she is, I thought, and furthermore, even if I did know where she was, how could I tell you, Xiao Ke? Wouldn't that be stirring up trouble?

"You should go ask Fu Jianling; she might know." Fu Jianling was one of Cong Rong's co-workers at the kindergarten and was her closest friend.

Xiao Ke said goodbye to me.

I placed the phone back in the cradle and pondered where Cong Rong might have gone. I felt a vague sense of unease.

Several days later, I ran into Fu Jianling on the street, and asked her how Cong Rong was doing. She told me that Cong Rong had been living with her for the past couple of days. Xiao Ke had already called once, but after that they'd had no news. "Why?" I asked.

Fu Jianling said, "Cong Rong had an abortion."

I stared blankly, "How could she do that? I never would have thought she'd do that."



Actually, I had thought of that, but hearing this confirmation still shocked me. Fu Jianling said, “I haven’t seen you in so long! Your kid must be so big now.”

“Yeah, he can say ‘daddy’ now,” I said.

“What’s his name?” asked Fu Jianling.

“Xia Zhou,” I said, “Xia Zhou.”

Suddenly, that blue scarf sprang into my mind, with its light blue color like a lake and faint skin-like texture. I didn’t know where I had put it.

16

Broken beams of reflected sunlight pierced into the small room. Pharmacist Xiao Ke was looking at Secretary Zhang, while not far from them a dead mouse floated in their toilet bowl, like the last withered autumn leaf.

On this lazy afternoon, Pharmacist Xiao Ke and Secretary Zhang once again played the finger-guessing game.

But they could not finish the game. For a full six or seven minutes, their selections were completely the same. Just as they were about to determine the victor, Pharmacist Xiao Ke looked out of the iron bars. The police officer who had arrested him three days earlier, Officer B, was pulling out his keys.

June 4th, 1997

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