

Throwing Out the Baby

Author

Xu Zechen



Born in 1978 in Jiangsu Province, Xu obtained a master's degree in Chinese literature at Peking University, and is now an editor at *People's Literature* magazine. Despite this pedigree, Xu's fiction is focused primarily on China's less-fortunate social classes—peddlers of pirated DVDs, migrant workers—and his spare, realist style lends some wry humor to their struggles. Xu has published three novels, *Midnight's Door*, *Night Train* and *Heaven on Earth*, and a collection of short stories entitled *How Geese Fly up to Heaven*. He has won several prizes within China for new and promising writers, and is generally considered one of the burgeoning new stars of China's literary scene.

Translator

Nicky Harman

Nicky Harman lives in the UK. She has worked as a literary translator for a dozen years and, until the spring of 2011, also lectured at Imperial College London. Now, in addition to translating, she organizes translation-focused events and mentors new translators from Chinese. She led the Chinese–English workshop at the British Centre for Literary Translation Summer School from 2009 to 2011 and in 2011 was Translator-in-Residence at the London Free Word Centre. Authors she has translated include Zhang Ling (*Gold Mountain Blues*); Yan Geling (*Flowers of War*), Han Dong (*A Phone Call from Dalian: Collected Poems*, and *Banished!*), Hong Ying (*K—The Art of Love*), and Xinran.

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The frog was leaping away but we were closing in on both sides, running along bent over, our eyes fixed on its yellow-green back, the mud squishing under our feet. There had just been a cloudburst and the leaden sky indicated it was going to rain again. But this frog was a whopper, much bigger than any we had in our bag, and Xiaomao wasn't going to let it get away. Before it got to the dike, the frog leaped into the air and landed on a tuft of grass. It was just about to take off again when Xiaomao speared it with his fish prong.

"Your turn," Xiaomao, said, wiping the mud from his hands and jerking his chin at the frog pinned by the prong, its limbs twitching. "You pick it up."

That was my job. I liked trotting along after Xiaomao. If he climbed a persimmon tree, I stood underneath and held out my jacket to catch the fruit. If he went to the Wulong River to pinch the watermelons the old geezer planted on its banks, I hid in the water waiting for him to throw them to me. If he speared frogs with his fish prong, I was there to pick them up and put them in the big red-and-blue-check shopping bag. I couldn't have been happier as I splashed barefoot through the grassy puddles. A few more raindrops fell as I took hold of the frog's leg and pulled the prong out. The frog croaked, and blood oozed from the wound. I held it belly-up. "Gotcha!" I said and threw it into the bag, where it scabbled around. I stood up and turned to go—then gave a shout of alarm. The bag dropped from my hands and, one after the other, the frogs hopped out.

"The bag! The bag!" shouted Xiaomao. "Tie it up, quick!"

I stood frozen to the spot. There was something stuck in my throat which was trying to come up. I pressed one hand to my mouth and pointed. I gurgled something that might have been words, or might just have been retching.

Xiaomao leaped toward me, put his foot on the open bag and, sweeping up one of the escapees, threw it back inside.

"Did you see a ghost?" he asked, tying the bag shut. He looked where I was pointing. "It's just a dead kid, what are you making such a fuss about?"

It was indeed a "dead kid." It was a baby's corpse. The frog had taken us into a part of the burial ground that was a jumble of untended grave mounds. I wasn't scared of the graves—Xiaomao and I often grazed the cattle there. I was only scared of that thrown-out baby. Actually, it was no longer a baby, it was the head and dismembered arms and legs of a baby. Xiaomao had told me there were always babies' corpses in the boggy ground among the

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untended burial mounds. Some were already dead, some only half dead, and some very much alive and kicking. But I hadn't seen any before now. I'd never been in this part of the graveyard. Beside the body parts, there was a torn piece of baby blanket and half a mat. I got a faint whiff of something rotting and I started to retch.

"Come on, let's get out of here," Xiaomao said, pulling me away. "It's raining again."

At that moment, the skies opened. My hand clamped to my mouth, I followed Xiaomao and we ran to the other end of the burial ground, to a place where there were some old pine trees. This was where we sheltered from the rain when we brought the cows here. I sank down and vomited up every bit of the watery soup I'd had at lunch, retching until my eyes and nose streamed. I kept thinking of the part of an arm I had seen by the baby blanket.

"You're such a sissy!" said Xiaomao. "It's only a dead baby. I spent hours catching those frogs and you let half of them get away!"

I sat silently, holding my head in my hands. There was a distant roll of thunder and the loud pattering of falling rain. I stood under the branches and cupped some rainwater in my hands, rinsed my mouth out, and washed my face. Then I felt a bit better and propped myself against the tree trunk. There was water everywhere. Xiaomao was running madly round the tree trunks, his prong in his hand, trying to catch a few more frogs while keeping out of the rain. Around and around he went, but there wasn't a frog to be seen. Panting, he threw down the prong, climbed up a burial mound, opened his pants, and started to piss from the top. Then he stopped and mumbled something.

"What?" I said listlessly.

"Someone's coming."

"So? Why shouldn't they walk around here?"

"No, it's not that. They're got something in their arms."

I got to my feet and climbed the mound. All you could see through the downpour was a person wearing a conical bamboo hat and a raincoat, with something in their arms. This lonely figure hurried along, slipping and sliding in the mud, heading our way. It was pouring rain, and he or she looked like the only human alive in the leaden gray wilderness.

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"Who do you think that is?"

"I don't know."

"It looks like a woman," said Xiaomao, finishing his piss. "Look at that waddle."

Xiaomao was right. As the figure came nearer, it looked more and more like a woman. She waddled along, almost engulfed by the rain. Now the pine branches overhead were dripping, and our shorts and vests were wet through. The woman left the road and took the muddy track which joined the burial ground to the paddies. Her head was bent low under the bamboo hat. I began to feel uneasy and pulled at the hem of Xiaomao's vest, so that water streamed off it.

"What do you think she's going to do?" asked Xiaomao in a low voice.

"I don't know."

"Throw out a baby, I bet," said Xiaomao confidently. "You just watch and see."

The woman seemed flustered, and several times almost fell over. She stopped at the boggy part and tipped the brim of her hat slightly to look around. Then she quickly undid her raincoat and took out a bulky cloth bundle. She looked around her again, threw it to the ground as if it was scalding her, then bent and almost picked it up again, but finally turned away. She buttoned up the raincoat as she hurried along, slipping and sliding even more than before. Once on the road, she looked back the way she had come, and took off her hat to wipe her face. The rain had eased up, and we saw it was Jade.

Jade was the daughter of Cao San the tradesman. The family lived on Fore Street but ran a store in Calabash Street. It was the busiest place on Calabash Street, and there were always people leaning on its grease-stained counter and passing time. The old women went there to buy needles and thread. The old men went there to buy pungent grain spirits from the jar which rested on the counter. When Xiaomao and I went, we usually made a beeline for the multicolored candy whose sweet smell filled the store. But it was the young men who spent the most time in the store: they dressed up in their best clothes before they went in because Jade stood behind the counter. She was a stunner, the best-looking girl in the village.

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Of course, that was all in the past. The young men hardly ever went there now because everyone knew that Jade and Chuncheng, the village head, had something going on. Well, that was what everyone said, anyway. I heard it too. My granny used to sigh every time she came back from the store.

"It's a sin," she'd say, "A sin."

"What's it to you?" said Mom. "It's their business."

"It's our business how people live," said my granny with disdain. "How old is Chuncheng anyway? His son's nearly as old as Jade!"

"Have you seen them together?"

"Everybody knows about it," said my granny. "Otherwise, why do you think Cao San's still in business?"

"Hasn't Cao San always been in business?" I asked her.

Mom clicked her chopsticks against her bowl. "Little pitchers have big ears," she said. "Eat your dinner."

I hadn't seen Jade with the village head. In fact, it was a long time since I'd seen her at all, either in the store or at the family allotment on the north bank of the river. Chuncheng was around a lot, bustling self-importantly in and out of people's houses, interrupting their dinner with imperious instructions about some new campaign which had just come down from the local government. He was said to be in his forties, but I thought he looked over fifty.

Jade wiped her face, put her hat back on, and went on her way. We could see her quite clearly. The sky was brightening and the wide, muddy road shone a brilliant yellow as it snaked away into the distance. The burial mounds gave off a grassy smell.

"Come on, let's go and look," said Xiaomao.

I shook my head in panic and squatted down clutching my stomach. "I've got a stomachache."

"You're such a sissy," said Xiaomao. "You wait here then."

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I walked around, clutching his prong in my hand to keep from being sick again, but I didn't see a single frog. There was just one toad, sitting stupidly on top of a grave mound smacking its lips. I speared it with the prong, lifting it belly-up, then let it go again.

It was a little while before Xiaomao got back, and the rain had completely stopped by then.

"It's a boy and its face is all purple," he said, "this big," holding his hands apart to show me. "You go and have a look."

"No," I said, getting goosebumps.

"I touched the baby's hand. It felt like the fingers were still twitching."

I was overcome by another violent fit of retching which seemed to come from the pit of my empty belly. I couldn't hold it back. I crouched there for ages, unable to move. My ears hummed and my head seemed to have got bigger. By the end, I was only bringing up a bit of blood-flecked saliva. Xiaomao was puzzled by the violent spasms which shook me. Finally he said: "OK, I'll stop talking about it. Let's go and spear frogs."

I sat down on the grass, wiping the tears from my eyes, and shook my head: "I want to go home."

Three years passed, and I was in my first year of middle school in the nearby town. One weekend at the end of June, I went home. Everyone on Calabash Street was busy planting the rice seedlings, and the paddies were full of people walking back and forth. I rolled my pants right up and got a ride to our paddy on the neighbor's cart. I hadn't been there before—the land had been divided up again last winter, my Mom told me, and we now had a field in Sand Heap Top. I knew Sand Heap Top, of course, but as I stood in the paddy, something felt wrong. There seemed to be a bit missing from Sand Heap Top, as if someone who'd had long hair turned out to be bald when they took off their hat. I stood pensively in the mud holding a bunch of seedlings but making no move to plant any.

Dad straightened. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Have you forgotten how?"

"There's something not right about this place. Something missing. It doesn't look like it used to."

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"They've moved the grave mounds," said my mother, pulling on the string that marked the row. "This used to be the burial ground."

As she spoke, it suddenly dawned on me: the grave mounds and the pine trees had all gone; there was just a flat expanse of ground left. I tried to figure out where the graves had been. Of course! Over there, where a crowd of people were bent double planting seedlings. The burial ground had been flattened back to its former shape. Each grave which once grew out of the paddy, had turned back into this field. Now that I had worked out exactly where I was, a sort of nameless dread began to steal over me. We were standing near where the bog had been. I suddenly felt as if something was trying to poke through the mud beneath my feet. It felt like tiny hands—little, disembodied baby hands. It was as if they were giving a final, last twitch before dying. A strange itching sensation flooded through my whole body and I felt as if I was floating. I jumped up with a yell and fled, panic-stricken, in the direction of the dike, nearly tripping over the planting strings and pulling them out of the ground as I went. I clawed my body with my muddy hands. I kept jumping up and down on the dike until everyone burst out laughing. They'd never seen anyone behaving like that in a paddy.

"What's up?" Dad looked a bit annoyed. "What's the problem?"

"It's nothing. I've got an itch," I said.

Everyone around me straightened up and started yelling at me.

"Just a few days of school and you can't take a bit of mud any more, is that it?"

"You got a legful of leeches?"

Just then, I heard a girl who had been working in Cao San's field say: "I think I'm going to take a break. I'll skip lunch, I don't mind."

It was Cao San's daughter, Jade. A couple of years back, she had married, moved thirty *li* away to Stone River, and now had a year-old child. She had come back to the village to help her parents plant the rice seedlings. She stood there in the mud, a bunch of seedlings in her left hand, white knees showing below rolled-up trouser legs, and smiled right at me.

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