# Renditions

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## Table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Editor's Page</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced School of Learning</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translated by D. C. Lau</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Zhang Elopes with Star Brothers in the Night: A Story from the ‘Zuiweng tanlu’</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translated by Alister D. Inglis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jin Shengtan's Preface to the Twenty-eight Chapter of <em>Shuihu Zhuan</em></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translated by Xiao Rao</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Heavenly Way and the Human World</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translated by Kevin Hsu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The History of Humanity: An Interpretation of the German Biologist Haeckel's Monist Study of Racial Genesis, Phylogeny</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translated by Naikan Tao</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waverings: excerpts</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translated by David Hull</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ten Poems Selected from <em>Paradise Lost</em></td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translated by Chen Chienmin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Platinum Statue of the Female Body</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translated by Ping Zhu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Notices</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Authors</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Contributors</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6:55 A.M.: Doctor Xie wakes up.
7:00 a.m.: Doctor Xie leaps out of bed.
7:10 a.m.–7:30 a.m.: Doctor Xie does stretches in his room.
8:10 a.m.: a middle-aged bachelor with a meticulously shaved chin comes down the stairs. He has a lean, abstinent face and a pair of meditative and somewhat melancholic eyes. He is five feet and nine inches tall, and weighs 142 pounds.
8:10 a.m.–8:25 a.m.: sitting on the veranda adjoining the living room, Doctor Xie enjoys his first pipe of tobacco.
8:25 a.m.: a servant brings him his newspaper and breakfast: a pot of coffee, two slices of toast, two fried eggs, and a fresh orange. The servant puts the coffee on Doctor Xie’s right-hand side and the toast on his left, the fried eggs on his plate, the orange right in front of him, and the newspaper to the left of that. Doctor Xie frowns and moves the newspaper to the right. He makes the sign of the cross and offers a quiet prayer, then enjoys his breakfast at leisure.
8:50 a.m.: dressed in a neat black suit emitting a mixed smell of alcohol, tobacco, carbonic acid and coffee, Doctor Xie drives to his clinic on no. 55 Sichuan Road in his 1927 Morris sports car.

‘SEVEN! The seventh female patient … a mystery …?’

Doctor Xie turns away from the washbasin, thinking to himself.
Narrow shoulders, plump breasts, slender waist, delicate wrists and ankles. Around five feet seven inches tall. The colour of the skin on her bare arms is pale, like that of an anaemic patient. Her lychee-like eyes luminous with faint enigmatic light, calm and indifferent.
(Postpartum depression? Abnormal uterus position? Tuberculosis? Anaemia?)
‘Please sit down!’
She sits.
Gentle fragrance, flowing skirt, dainty heels, all accompanied the seventh female patient into the room as she settled in front of his purple pipe. She is in a sap-green cheongsam, rouge adorning her cheeks and crimson lipstick on her lips. Her eyelids are painted in a dark, almost purple, colour. Her face is a dismal white lotus. A pair of long and understated onyx earrings, an understated onyx ring, a platinum wrist-watch.

‘What ails you, ma’am?’

‘It’s not like that, I don’t have any disease. It is like … like … Well, let’s just call it asthenia. But I am not the skinny type, I’ve got fat beneath my skin. You can say that I have a serious lack of blood. My cheeks are pale, and the skin all over my body looks like platinum.’ She sounds like she is talking in her sleep. She talks about her symptoms in such a distant, vague, apathetic and indifferent manner, as if she is talking about the symptoms of a stranger. Yet her tone is so intimate and mild, as if she is talking about daily trivialities.

‘My appetite could not be worse, you know, I eat so little each meal, a hen probably eats more than I do. What’s worst is I can’t sleep at night, or can’t sleep soundly. I often wake up in the middle of the night for no reason at all. There’s another odd thing: on bleak days or overly bright afternoons, I become melancholy for no apparent cause. Some say my body is weak; some say I’m in the early stage of tuberculosis. But how can I possibly believe them? I’m still young, I need to be healthy …’

Her eyes suddenly brightened, but only for three seconds before they at once regained their calmness, dimming to that faint enigmatic glow, again indifferent. Her voice grows vaguer, almost indistinct. ‘A lot of people have advised me to get some sun, or take a trip abroad. They’ve recommended me to come and see you …’

As she pants softly, sap-green tides surge on both sides of her bosom.

(Insomnia, sluggish appetite, anaemia, flushed cheeks, neurasthenia; early stage of tuberculosis! And excessive sexual desire; the vague voice, the faint light in her eyes.)

Suddenly, erotic desires that have lain dormant for thirty-eight years surge up. Doctor Xie takes a puff of tobacco to hide his embarrassment. Taking the pipe out of his mouth, he asks her:

‘Do you have chills or fevers every now and again?’

‘I don’t know for sure. I haven’t paid attention.’

(Such a careless woman!)

‘Any cold sweats when you wake up at night?’

‘There seems to have been some, recently.’

‘A lot?’
‘Well … not a lot.’
‘Your memory is not very good?’
‘No, not good. My memory used to be the best. When I was in middle school, I would only review the lessons two hours before exams, and I always got above eighty …’ She pauses as if she cannot catch her breath.
‘Let me listen to your lungs first.’
She adeptly unbuttons the lapel of her cheongsam. Inside is a piece of black lingerie, its two embroidered straps languidly climbing her pale shoulders.
He taps on her chest with his middle finger, then presses the metallic stethoscope onto it. He can feel his left cheek turning numb, his lips starting to tremble, his fingers going stiff. All he can hear is her heartbeat—the sound of a strange and mysterious heart. After a while, he hears his own voice:
‘Breathe in! Deeply!’
A black boneless bosom slowly swells in front of his eyes, the two embroidered straps also stretching out.
He hears himself talking again: ‘Breathe in! Breathe in deeply!’
Once again, the black boneless bosom slowly swells in front of his eyes, the two embroidered straps stretching in unison.
A mysterious heart is pumping violently, in a way both strange and familiar. He keeps listening to it until he is no longer clear whether it is his own heart pumping or hers.
He heaves a sigh and sits up.
‘You have early stage tuberculosis. I advise you to take a trip, preferably to the countryside …’
‘One year of rehabilitation?’ As she buttons herself up she looks at him, her unfeeling eyes probing his face.
‘Many friends and doctors gave me the same advice. But my husband can neither leave behind his real estate company in Shanghai nor leave me. He’s a child, he can’t live without me. So I’m reluctant to leave Shanghai …’ With her body leaning forward a bit, she implores him: ‘You can cure me, Doctor Xie, I trust you so much!’
‘I will try of course, but … now you have to tell me more about your illness. Please tell me your age.’
‘Twenty-four.’
‘How old were you when you had your first menstruation?’
‘Less than fourteen years old.’
(Precocity!)
‘Is your period always on time?’
'It was often once every two months or several times a month when I was sixteen. After I got married I had a miscarriage, since then my periods are hardly ever on time.'

‘And the amount when it does come?’

‘It varies.’

‘How old were you when you got married?’

‘Twenty-one.’

‘Is your husband healthy?’

‘He’s an athlete, a very strong man.’

The seventh female patient in front of him looks like a piece of soaked paper about to dissolve into fragments at any time. Doctor Xie turns silent. With his eyes fixed on her, he is absorbed in meditation; yet he does not know what he is thinking about. After a while, he says:

‘You two should sleep in separate beds. Otherwise, your illness will become a problem. Do you understand what I mean?’

Her response is a nod. A slight cunning and shy gleam flashes in her eyes, then disappears without a trace.

‘The chances of your recovery lie in your own hands. Come here for heat-lamp therapy every day. Eat more butter, do not think too much. Go to bed early and get up early. If you have time, go to the suburbs or to the park and sit there for an hour or two, is that clear?’

She sits still as if she hasn’t heard his words. She looks at him, or maybe at the window behind him.

‘I’ll write a prescription for you. Your last name, please?’

‘My husband’s last name is Zhu.’

(Excessive sexual desires, fatigue, menstrual disorders! Early stage tuberculosis. What medicine should I give to this mysterious woman?)

Doctor Xie lays out a copy of prescription paper in front of him and lowers his head to ponder. By the leg of the desk, he sees a pair of delicate ankles wrapped in fine stockings, looking as if they would crumble at any moment. Doctor Xie feels a lazy stream of liquid bursting from his heart and flowing into every artery and capillary in his body, even his veins are filled with an unfamiliar itch.

(I have seen quite a few female patients over the past ten years. I frequently encountered various types of naked female bodies in laboratories while studying. When I looked at a naked woman, I always saw straight through the layers of skin and fat to the internal organs and bones. Why is the temptation of this female patient drilling into my mind like a maggot? A mystery … what kind of medicine should I give her …)
After he writes the prescription he raises his head, only to find that she is calmly looking at him. It seems that the passions that boil from her lower body are rising directly to her indifferent eyes. He feels cold sweat gathering on his forehead.

‘Take a bag of this medicinal powder after each meal, understand? Let’s take that heat-lamp therapy now. UV is particularly good for your anaemic skin.’

He stands up and heads to the operating room. She follows him.

It is a small white room. There are several white glass cabinets, in which some shiny metal utensils such as scalpels and clamps are placed. There are also some white washbasins and spittoons. At the centre of the room is an anatomy bed, stretching its many thin legs like a spider.

‘Take off your clothes.’

‘All of them?’

Doctor Xie hears his trembling voice answering: ‘All of them.’

She looks at him with indifferent eyes, as if she is devoid of feelings. He feels that all of his muscles are turning numb. He drops his head and stares blankly at the thin legs of the anatomy bed.

‘The stockings too?’

Inside his head he replies: ‘It’s not necessary to take the stockings off.’ But if the lingerie is taken off, are those stockings supposed to weave a silky dream around those platinum legs forever? So his mouth replies: ‘Take them off, too.’

Her sap-green cheongsam and embroidered lingerie fall into a defenceless pile upon the back of the white-painted chair. Her stockings coil around the chair like a spider-web.

‘I’m done.’

Doctor Xie raises his head.

Standing on her delicate ankles with one leg upright and the other aslant, she looks like a platinum statue of a human body. An inorganic statue, devoid of shame, devoid of morals, devoid of human desires. Metallic, streamlined, as if one’s gaze would easily glide off along the lines of the body. This senseless and emotionless statue stands there, waiting for his orders.

He says: ‘Please lie down on the bed, on your back.’

(Bed! On her back!)

‘Please lie down on the bed, on your back!’ There seems to be a loud echo resonating within his ears, Doctor Xie starts to panic like a man stripped of all cultivation and experience. With trembling hands, he moves the heat-lamp to the bedside and connects it to a power outlet. He holds the lamp ten inches above her, covering her body with the light.

She lies on her back, her eyes closed. In the dim light, her skin reflects a
metallic lustre, like a faded flower in the sunlight, exhibiting its lingering and wasting beauty. Her breathing gradually becomes even, though feeble. Her body, like a white birch, resting comfortably upon the bed. The two ripe grapes on her breasts shiver in the breeze of her respiration.

(There is no one else in the room ... such a marvellous platinum statue ... ‘I don't know for sure. I did not pay attention.’ Such a careless woman! Excessive sexual desires ... hazy voice ... indifferent eyes ... mysterious as if she were devoid of feelings ... radiating ascending passions ... no obstacles ... no resistance ... just lying there ...)

The room feels so stifling that Doctor Xie can hardly breathe. He hears his own heart throbbing agitatedly as if trying to jump from his throat. A primitive heat is burning upward from his lower body. The white-painted glass cabinets are gleaming, the anatomy bed is gleaming, the scalpels are gleaming, even his nervous tissues are gleaming. His head swells severely.

‘There is no one else here!’ The idea crushes him with the weight of a whole collapsed cosmos.

Trembling all over, Doctor Xie feels his legs moving forward inch by inch, his hands stretching forward inch by inch.

(Lord help me ... a platinum statue ... Lord help me ... a platinum statue ... Lord help me ... a platinum statue ... Lord help me ... a platinum statue ... Lord help me ... a platinum statue ... Lord help me ...)

The white-birch-like body gradually turns red under the UV light, like a faded flower resurrecting under the sunlight.

(The first redness appears! Enough, I can turn off the heat-lamp.)

But he stood paralyzed, the primitive heat all burning upward. Suddenly, Doctor Xie jerks forward, as if he has lost his balance. He feels that his entire soul jumps abruptly and he shivers like a malaria patient. She opens her eyes.

Doctor Xie swallows his saliva and turns off the power. He tells her: ‘Come out when you are dressed.’

After walking her to the front door and bidding her goodbye, Doctor Xie returns to his room. He loosens his tie, unbuttons the collar of his shirt, and wipes his face with a handkerchief. When he takes the pulse of the eighth patient and inquires about the symptoms, his heart hurts as if it has just been pierced by a nail.

4:00 P.M.: Doctor Xie returns home. His veranda is waiting for him, his coffee-pot is waiting for him, his library is waiting for him, his garden is waiting for him,
and his pet Robby is waiting for him.

Sitting on his veranda, he sips a cup of black Brazilian coffee while casually reading a detective novel. Robby is lying under his feet, his coffee-pot sits on the table, his extinguished pipe held to his mouth.

The contour of the trees softens bit by bit, weaving a hazy and dusky seasonal dream amidst the branches and leaves. A distant fragrance of flowers floats in the air. The steam from the coffee-pot and the smoke from his pipe stagger slowly toward the garden together, like a pair of old women with bound feet, until their flickering forms disappear behind the flower pedals.

He puts the novel on the table, takes a sip of the coffee, and leans back in his chair, blowing a column of smoke. The primitive heat he felt during the day is still steaming in his body.

‘A platinum statue of the female body! No colour in her cheeks, no humanity, so exotic. Neither her feelings nor her biological constitution can be understood. A new sexual object of 1933, one with a human shape but without human nature or feel!’

All of a sudden he feels lonely. He thinks that he lacks kids, and a woman knitting a sweater by his side. He needs a roomier bed, a vanity, some perfume, powder, and rouge.

That evening, contrary to habit, Doctor Xie attends a friend's dinner party. During the dinner party, contrary to habit, he makes advances to a young widow.

A MONTH LATER.

8:00 a.m.: Doctor Xie wakes up.

8:00 a.m.–8:30 a.m.: Doctor Xie lies in bed with his eyes open, listening to the sound of running water from the bathroom—Mrs Xie is bathing.

8:30 a.m.: a middle-aged gentleman with a meticulously shaved chin and a red tie comes downstairs together with his wife. He has a chubby face and a pair of cheerful eyes. He is five feet and nine inches tall, and weighs 149 pounds.

8:40 a.m.: sitting on the veranda adjoining the living room, Doctor Xie smokes his first cigarette (his pipe has been thrown into the fireplace by his wife) while discussing the day's lunch menu with his wife.

9:20 a.m.: dressed in a neat brown suit and emitting a mixed smell of alcohol, coffee, carbonic acid and cologne, Doctor Xie drives his wife to the Wing On Department Store in a 1933 Studebaker sedan, before he heads to his clinic on no. 55 Sichuan Road.