

# Can Xue

## The Child Who Raised Poisonous Snakes

(CHINA)

Sha-yuan—one might call him Sandy Plain—was a child with an ordinary face, lacking any notable features. When he was not talking, his face was a dead blank. But of course this is somewhat different from being a corpse.

"He has been a well-behaved child," his mother explained to me. "The only trouble with him is that he should never be allowed outdoors. There wouldn't have been any trouble if he had stayed at home. We discovered his problem when he was only six. Once he sneaked away without the notice of his father and me. I looked for him everywhere. Finally we found him sleeping among the rosebushes in the park. He was lying on his back, with his limbs stretched out in a casual way. He told us later that he had not seen any roses, but many snake heads. He said he could even see the bones inside the snakes. Then, as one snake bit him, he had fallen asleep. To tell the truth, Sha-yuan hadn't seen a single snake in his life up to that point. He only saw snakes on TV. His father and I were terrified, and we were more cautious than ever not to let him out."

While we were talking, Sha-yuan was sitting in the room facing a cupboard door covered with paper resembling wood grain, absolutely still and motionless. In my astonishment, I kept peering at him.

"Don't pay any attention to him. He long ago acquired the ability not to listen whenever he doesn't want to. Once a doctor suggested that we take the child to a resort and let him socialize with other people. According to the doctor, this would improve his condition. So we went to the seashore. Sha-yuan often played with the kind of unruly children one finds at the seaside during the day. But he felt tired very easily. We had been observing him because we couldn't help feeling anxious about the child. Whenever he felt tired, he simply lay down no matter where and fell asleep. He became so languid that he could sleep while washing his feet in the evening. We thought he was washing, but it was no more than a mechanical movement—his brain was at rest.

"The third day after our arrival at the seaside, a fisherman's son ran in with a bleeding finger, telling us that Sha-yuan had bitten him. We questioned Sha-yuan afterward about the incident. He smiled absently and claimed that the finger was the head of a snake. If he had not bitten it, it would have

bitten him. We stayed at the shore for a month. Apparently the beautiful scenery had no positive influence on Sha-yuan. That year he turned nine.

"After that, we traveled somewhere every year—to the desert or the lakes, to the forest or the plains. But Sha-yuan was completely indifferent. Sitting in the train, he behaved exactly as he did at home, never looking out the window, never talking to anybody. It was possible that he did not even know he was traveling. But his father and I knew that the child had been too carefree ever since he was young. He never paid attention to his surroundings. He might have been a little cold. I don't know how to put it, but he lacked sensitivity toward new things.

"It culminated last year when we discovered that his right arm was covered with wounds. Questioning him closely, we were led to a pitch-dark air-raid shelter where he squatted down with a flashlight. We found a box of little flowery snakes. His father asked him with horror where those snakes had come from. Sha-yuan replied: 'I caught them one after another.' This was very odd because he had been with us every day. Hadn't we watched him with care? 'I was not always with you. Don't be fooled by superficial appearances,' he said in his casual tone. After his father coaxed him away, I found a hoe and exterminated those little vipers.

"When we got home, we stayed up nights to prevent his sneaking away again. Yet after two days, fresh wounds had appeared on his arms—like pairs of red spots from snakebites. He said to us, 'Why bother to tire yourselves out. You simply can't understand that I'm only sitting with you in appearance. But there's no place I can't go even while I seem to be sitting with you. There are so many snakes, and they lose their way often. So I gather them from here and there, so they won't feel lonely. Of course you can't see them, but yesterday I found one over there under the bookshelf. I can always find snakes if I look around. I was afraid of them when I was young. I even bit a snake's head once. I can't help laughing at myself when I think of it now.' He kept talking to us like this."

One day, while sitting with his back to us, Sha-yuan suddenly patted his head with his hand. We walked over, and Sha-yuan's mother turned him around so he was facing us. His facial expression was calm and relaxed. Cautiously choosing my words, I asked him what he was thinking about while sitting here, and if he was feeling lonely.

"Listen," he replied briefly.

"What do you hear?"

"Nothing, very quiet. But the situation will change completely after nine o'clock in the evening."

"How can you possibly dare to desert us like that? How can we live without you?" Sha-yuan's mother started her lament.

"You can't call it desertion," Sha-yuan said gently. "I was born to catch snakes."

I advised Sha-yuan's mother not to worry too much about her son. In my opinion, her boy, odd as he was, appeared to be a genius, who might one day turn out to be somebody.

"We don't care if he will be somebody," the mother said. "Both his father and I are only ordinary people. How is it that we should have a son who is involved in such shameful business? Raising poisonous snakes, that's frightening. What does he want to do? I might as well have given birth to a poisonous snake! We simply can't stop worrying about him. We're completely worn out by him. The worst thing is that now he can do strange things even without going outdoors. He always has a way to achieve what he wants."

One day I saw Sha-yuan's mother coming out of the air-raid shelter with a hoe in her hand. She looked wan and sorrowful. She told me she had just exterminated another nest of little snakes, eight altogether. She was almost bald, and she walked like an aged woman. Behind her appeared Sha-yuan's father, an old man who couldn't stop blinking one eye. Finally Sha-yuan himself emerged. His back was bent, and he appeared calm. When he saw me, he nodded and started talking: "I created this scene of slaughter on purpose. It might even be described as spectacular—eight lives destroyed once and for all. To them, it was not a matter of any particular terror. I was only surprised by the firmness and confidence of the hands that raised the hoe."

When asked if he was the one who took his parents to the shelter, he said yes. As soon as they asked, he took them there. He had always maintained a kind of curiosity about his parents' behavior. While he was talking, his mother stared at the sky with her empty eyes, and his father mumbled repeatedly: "Extreme views can cause tremendous difficulty in a person's life, but beautiful scenery can open one's mind."

I found that the slaughterer, the mother, was the most crestfallen among the three, but Sha-yuan remained detached. All at once it dawned on me that there existed a subtle relationship among these three, a peculiar mutual check. What had just happened was a proof. He didn't have to take his parents to the shelter; instead, he could have led them somewhere else. Was this only the result of his easygoing personality?

Then I recalled Sha-yuan's infancy. No doubt, he had been an extraordinarily sensitive baby, with extremely rich facial expressions. The mother had been very proud of him, yet she was nervous. She told me privately that she found the child got tired very easily, particularly when others were talking. As soon as a person started talking to him, he would lower his eyelids and fall into a sound sleep. "He's just like one of those sensitive mimosa plants whose leaves fold up when you touch them, though he's not as shy." Sha-yuan kept his habit until he was five. Then he learned to control himself, though purely for the sake of courtesy. When others talked to him a little bit too long, he would start yawning, then doze off without any consideration for the speaker.

At that time, he did not hate traveling. On the contrary, he appeared to like it somewhat, because he did not need to listen to others while traveling. While his parents were enjoying the beauty of nature, he would sit down to the side and listen attentively to any smallest sound made by little animals. He could always point out accurately where a field vole had just dug a hole, or in which

direction a banded krait was advancing quietly. It was possible he had been training his unique listening ability ever since he was born. It seems, however, that this talent has never been tuned to the human voice. After several years' practice, he could make certain movements just by activating his mental will. On the surface, he was a soft and obedient kid. Such a child very easily makes people lose their vigilance. The fisherman's child was bitten under such circumstances. Now Sha-yuan's parents were getting hurt. It was a profound puzzle how he considered the people and objects surrounding him. On the one hand, he seemed to pity those little snakes, but on the other hand, he instigated his parents to slaughter them. Nobody can figure out such contradictory actions. I can't say that beautiful scenery did not affect him. It may have been the beautiful scenery that cultivated his temperament. After all, different people can appreciate scenery very differently. By the same token, his parents' painstaking efforts to control the child could only lead to the opposite result.

Then suddenly there came a day when Sha-yuan stopped meditating facing the wall, and his attitude toward his parents also turned warmer. Whenever I went for a visit, I always saw the threesome living in harmony. The smile had returned to his mother's face. In the past decade or so, the old lady had been completely tied down by her son. But now, even the wrinkles on her face had smoothed out. She said to me happily, "My child Sha-yuan is getting sensible. Just think how many poisonous snakes I have killed for his sake!" As she was talking, Sha-yuan in the background was nodding his head in agreement.

I did not believe the matter was as simple as that. I felt vaguely the falseness in Sha-yuan's smile. Though he was no longer raising poisonous snakes, who could guess what new trick he might be up to? I decided to talk to him seriously.

"Now I don't need a place to raise snakes," Sha-yuan answered. "They are in my belly. They don't stay inside all the time, of course. They come out whenever I want them to. The little flowery snake is my favorite."

Staring at his body, which was getting thinner daily, I asked if his mother knew about all of this. But Sha-yuan said that it was not necessary to let her know. Since the little snakes did not really occupy space, the matter need not be considered to exist so long as he did not mention it. Just let everybody be happy. My next question was whether this would affect his health.

He gave me an attentive look, then he suddenly appeared sleepy. Yawning hard, he said, "Who doesn't have something like that in his belly? They just don't know, that's all. That's why they're healthy. I'm always sleepy. You've talked so much. I rarely talk so much. You're weird."

Despite my efforts to ask for more, he dropped his head down and fell into a sound sleep while standing by the table.

Sha-yuan's mother got really excited, and she looked much younger now. While packing, she said, "It seems that travel is necessary." Sha-yuan joined

her with joy in packing. But after a while, he turned aside and started vomiting. "Nothing serious." He wiped his pale lips and muttered almost secretly, "It was some mischief from the little flowery snake."

Quickly they started their journey on a northwest-bound train. It was a windy day.

They did not come back until two years later. The three looked the same as they had been, harmonious and peaceful. Nothing unusual could be detected. Sha-yuan obviously had gained some weight, and his face looked healthier than before. When I asked him quietly about the snakes, he said they were still in his belly. But he had learned how to adjust, so that even running and doing the high jump would not cause him any harm. Sometimes, having snakes in his belly was even beneficial to his health. I asked him what benefit it could bring to the body, and Sha-yuan's yawns started again. He complained that it was painful to listen to others. Sha-yuan's mother invited me for dinner: While eating, the old lady, who used to grumble, was now silent. She did not appear as confident as before. Sha-yuan's father only said one sentence: "No more travel." Then everybody was quiet.

After that they kept their front gate open. The parents stopped watching Sha-yuan's behavior as if they had lost interest and become oblivious. But they appeared anxious and from morning till night they checked their watches constantly. Obviously they were waiting for something. "Waiting for their deaths," Sha-yuan said. He tapped his belly, which was flat. There was no sign of anything inside. According to Sha-yuan, it had worked out fine. Nobody suspected that he raised snakes anymore. But in fact, the leopard can't change its spots.

The fall wind was whistling across the plain. It sounded musical from morning to night. This mysterious family was baffling me more and more. I remembered that the mother was only fifty, and the father, fifty-five. But just see how old they looked. Both were suffering from cardiac arteriosclerosis and their slow movements worried me. "He has destroyed us," the father said suddenly one day. His facial expression revealed his confusion. "We are dying so fast." After the remark, his face relaxed instantly. His glance lingered on the skinny shoulder of Sha-yuan. The glance was both kind and loving. The three certainly had a tacit understanding.

The parents had different explanations about the disappearance of the child. According to the father, the boy had mentioned going to the air-raid shelter after supper, because he hadn't been there for a long time, and he was curious about any new changes there. Neither of the parents had paid any attention to their son's remark. They were too tired. The son then stood up and walked toward the door with staggering steps. Recently he had become all bony. He did not return that whole night, and nobody bothered looking for him. "It's too troublesome," the father said, his eyes fixed on the windowpane.

Sha-yuan's mother never admitted that her son had walked out on her. "The child was never reliable. For more than a decade, we had both kept our eyes wide open in watching, without any obvious effect. What can I say? He

could still wander around at will without our seeing him. Now I've given up. Who knows whether or not he was my child to start with, or even if he had been living with us at all? I don't think he left yesterday. I've never even been able to confirm his existence."

Listening to them, I became perplexed also. What was Sha-yuan, after all? I pondered hard, but in my mind there were only some miscellaneous fragments, some odd remarks. When I tried to concentrate, even the remarks faded away. As a result, I could not think of anything about Sha-yuan except his name.

Just when everybody believed that he had vanished, however, Sha-yuan came back. He resumed his quiet and friendly life at home. His behavior once again contributed to the indifferent attitude of his parents. They no longer cared at all if the boy existed or not. They were simply worn out.

"Where did you get the name Sha-yuan?" I asked abruptly.

"I've been wondering about it myself. Nobody ever gave him that name. Where *did* it come from?" the mother said, looking confused.

*Translated from the Chinese by Ronald R. Janssen and Jian Zhang*

# The Mysterious Frontiers of

Can Xue

By Evan James

From the New Yorker



“Frontier,” a mesmerizing novel by the Chinese author Can Xue, which was published in translation earlier this year by Open Letter Books, begins with a young woman named Lujin who has decided to make a life for herself in Pebble Town. The area is unusually abundant with animal life: the novel’s first chapter teems

with wagtails, willow warblers, geese, horses, snow leopards, wolves, sheep, goats, geckos, and frogs. At first, “Frontier” resembles a fish-out-of-water story; as Lujin encounters new people in the market where she sells cloth, we imagine that she will be tested and changed according to some established narrative laws. The reader quickly abandons this notion, however—along with the expectation that anything like a traditional plot will emerge. This is not to say that nothing happens in “Frontier.” In fact, things are happening all the time. Each chapter is devoted to between one and four of about a dozen characters, many of whom migrated to Pebble Town to work at the mysterious Design Institute. Lujin, we are told, “had never understood anything about the Design Institute—not the people and not the work, either. From the time she was old enough to understand things, she had listened closely and observed. Sometimes, Dad would explain a little to her, but his explanations frequently drew her into deeper, more complicated, and darker entanglements.”

The author, whom the American novelist and editor Bradford Morrow has described as one of the most “innovative and important” in

contemporary world literature, revels in such mysteries and entanglements. Can Xue is the genderless pen name of Deng Xiaohua, who was born in 1953, in Changsha City, in Hunan Province. In Chinese, the name means “residual snow,” a phrase, Deng has explained, that is used to describe both “the dirty snow that refuses to melt” and “the purest snow at the top of a high mountain.” The moniker hints at the author’s contrary relationship to contemporary Chinese literary culture, which, she has said, provides “no support for originality, which is sometimes even suppressed.” In interviews, her persona is mischievous; she regularly refers to herself in the third person (“Why do young people matter so much for Can Xue? Because they are Can Xue’s hope”) and sometimes communicates in an almost mystical register. The essence of her artistic mission, she has said, lies in “waking up people’s souls” and “drawing information from Great Nature.”

Mao’s Cultural Revolution played a catastrophic role in Deng’s childhood. Her parents, both of whom worked at the newspaper *New Hunan Daily News*, were condemned as anti-rightists by the Communist Party and sent to the country for “reeducation” through labor. The family—Deng was one of eight children—suffered extreme deprivations, and Deng’s education ended after elementary school, though she later immersed herself in classics by Western writers. It was at the age of thirty, married and with a son, that Deng began to write. She was working as a tailor with her husband at the time; the couple had opened a shop after teaching themselves to make clothes. Her description of her writing process conjures the same sense of wonder that permeates her novels: “A strange thing happened,” she has said. “I found that when I was writing fiction, I didn’t need to work out plots or a structure or anything beforehand. No matter, a short piece or a long piece, it was the same. I just sat down and wrote without thinking.”

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

A Mother Uses Art to Alleviate Her Sons' Pandemic Fears

Deng, who is sixty-four, now lives with her husband in Beijing and writes every day. She has published dozens of short stories and novellas, several novels, and books of commentary on Kafka, Borges, Calvino, Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe. So far, only eight of her books have been translated into English. Though written, or at least translated, using concrete, often simple language, they rarely rely on conventional storytelling or character studies. Still, certain thematic obsessions emerge; questions of vision and perception, for instance, come up often. In "Five Spice Street"—a hysterically funny novel in which the residents of a three-mile-long street endlessly gossip and speculate about the sex life and desires of a woman named Madam X—the main character performs "occult" experiments involving gazing into mirrors and microscopes, at one point claiming to have "retired" her sense of sight. The short story "Vertical Motion" is narrated by a race of "little critters" who have "neither eyes nor any olfactory sense" and who "live in the black earth beneath the desert," tunnelling through the soil and sometimes communicating about the fate of a forebear who tunneled too high and vanished into the landscape above.

Can Xue has likened her writing to the pioneering dance of the choreographer Isadora Duncan—a comparison that captures, in "Frontier," the fresh, unexpected ways in which one moment flows into the next. Now someone is slamming a grocery basket upside down, releasing a bunch of live frogs; now a young woman is encircled by a grove of dead poplars; now snow leopards are descending upon the market in Pebble Town from Snow Mountain. There is also a resplendent garden that grows "in the air"—full of "palms, banyans, and coconut trees, as well as some other unusual plants." One never knows to whom this garden will appear, or when, or why. Nevertheless, its appearance brings pleasure and momentary enlightenment.

Can Xue takes pride in her total commitment to what some have described as "difficult" literature. "Everyone knows the experiment in fiction I have been conducting for over thirty years has been an experiment without an escape route," she recently wrote, in "A Short

Piece on Experimental Fiction.” I was reminded of this characteristic statement while reading “Frontier,” in which one senses the rigorous forward motion of Can Xue’s technique forming her vision as the narrative develops. One of the most intriguing relationships in the book is between Lujin and a dark-skinned man from Africa who goes by the name of Ying and who works at the Design Institute. From one of their early encounters—a walk around the landscape by the Institute, during which they talk about subjects including snakes, Lujin’s mother, and “a rag-picker who’s been circling around this office building for more than ten years”—I sensed an affection in their often gnomic exchanges, a mutual fascination and tenderness. Ying’s connection to Africa ignites Lujin’s imagination; she is filled with “complicated feelings.” But Can Xue is soon dancing on to other characters, and when Lujin next encounters Ying, a few years have apparently passed. He looks “older and a little humpbacked,” and the two talk as reunited friends. The scene, like many others in “Frontier,” unfolds in a strange and intimate way: Ying’s voice is “as soft and pleasant as before,” but his conversation feels abstracted. (“Ever since the old director died, work has turned into a hobby for everyone. This institute of ours hasn’t had a leader for a long time: it’s more a concept that’s leading us,” he says.) Ying appears again, briefly, near the end of the book, but none of the relationship’s ambiguity is resolved. By that point in the novel, any conventional resolution would have felt like a betrayal anyway. The open-endedness of “Frontier,” its sprawling tapestry of intricately interconnected phenomena, becomes its own pleasure, which also feels like a surrender.