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the Cultural
Medallion

stories



CHEW KOK CHANG



Other Cities, Other Lives



TRANSLATED BY SHELLY BRYANT

Other Cities, Other Lives

stories



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CHEW KOK CHANG

OTHER CITIES, OTHER LIVES

TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE BY SHELLY BRYANT



EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

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of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons,
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First Edition

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Preface

FOR THOSE UNFAMILIAR with modern Chinese literature, the name Chew Kok Chang may not ring a bell. But for those in the know, this name will certainly hyperlink to other great works.

Known for his simple, but extraordinarily profound works, Chew has been the shining 'golden signboard' in modern Chinese literature for over half a century. Chew's writing portfolio is diverse, encompassing poetry, literary reviews, short stories and 'mini novels', known to most as novellas.

He was born in 1934 and will be celebrating his 80th birthday next year. His trademark is the ability to write stories in simple, yet profound language. This makes his work not only touching, but enjoyably simple for people of any age to read. Through the decades, he has proven himself a versatile writer, winning the favour of critics many a time. In his writing career, he has won the Singapore Chinese Literature Award in 1995 and the Cultural Medallion in 1990, one of Singapore's most prestigious awards.

During his childhood years, Chew was unable to participate in many of the games and activities that other children enjoyed, due to ill health. This, however, proved to be a blessing as he spent his time reading avidly, jumpstarting his career as a writer.

His first book, *The Dream of a Child*, a collection of poems, was

written by hand, but now, with the technological advancements of the 21st century, Chew is able to write his stories quickly using his Samsung Galaxy Note 2 and post them together with photographs on his blog, *Zhou Can's Writing Desk* (www.zhoucanshuzhuo.wordpress.com) on a daily basis. Should you wish to read more of his works, the blog is certainly the best place to go.

In *Other Cities, Other Lives*, Chew does again what he has been doing ever since he was in Secondary 3, the time he wowed his readers with his first publication. His language is simple but poetic, producing smooth, creative, and engaging pieces. He seeks to capture the disillusion of the Chinese in a large variety of cities, reflecting different morals, virtues and faults that readers most likely are acquainted with, in a new light. When we read about the characters in the stories, we do not necessarily like them, but we realise that we are some of them, and they are some of us. Such is Chew's writing prowess.

Chew's Chinese-language works are regarded as models for modern written Chinese. His unadorned but natural, fluid style of writing serves as a fine exemplar for aspiring writers. If only the younger generation could emulate him and earnestly learn to be well-organised narrators who provide meticulous and precise descriptions, there would be no end of excellent Chinese literature from our little island.

I strongly recommend parents and language teachers to encourage their children and students to read Chew's works in their original language. This will help the younger generation to learn from one of the best Chinese writers and master the Chinese language.

The emotions and characters in these stories, once available only to Chinese-language readers, are now available to the large group of

English-language readers through Shelly Bryant's masterful translation. For this, we have to thank Epigram Books for initiating and publishing this wonderful translation series and the National Arts Council for their full support.

A good book should never have a long preface. I shall not delay you any further from enjoying these wonderful tales.

CHUA CHEE LAY

PhD, East Asian Languages and Literature
University of Wisconsin

Translator's Note

ASIA IN THE 20th century was the site of one of the most significant shifts in power—political, economic and ideological—to have happened in modern history. In the early 1900s, much of Asia was under colonial rule, and the removal of foreign powers formed a significant shift not only in the governing of many Asian nations, but also in the fortunes of the individuals who peopled those nations. The end of British rule in India was one of the key events of the 20th century, while the end of semi-colonial rule in certain parts of China, especially the coastal regions, was a major impetus for the spread of communism across much of Asia. These events, occurring in two larger nations whose historical impact on Singapore has been immeasurable, had ripple effects in our little island nation, shaping our lives on the individual level in ways we may not often stop to consider.

In the latter half of the century, Singapore gained independence—or perhaps was thrust into it—and, with great determination, set out to thrive in one of the fast-growing regions on the globe, all the while struggling to forge a uniquely Singaporean identity. Singapore's economic and political success story has been well-documented in academic journals, business reviews and various sites of political discussion, but life as it is lived on our streets, in our HDB flats,

our offices, our schools and our *kopi tiams* remains largely untold outside of our own shores.

Other Cities, Other Lives by Chew Kok Chang seeks to change this, collecting a series of very short stories that reflect on the experiences of a Chinese Singaporean who lived through a time of volatile—and exciting—change in the region. Many of the stories collected in *Other Cities, Other Lives* make observations about the changing face of Asia in the form of short travelogues, demonstrating how the shifts in attitudes and policies in countries in the region, especially China, have demanded a reaction not only from neighbouring nations, but also from the people who make up those nations. Chew has been a frequent traveller in the region, especially in China during the first 20 or so years of its Reform and Opening Up, and his observations reflect the ways Asia has altered over the past several decades and record one man's sensitive responses to those social changes.

But the changes in the region have not all occurred on foreign soil. Singapore itself has grown in unprecedented ways in a very short time, and Chew has been both an observer and an agent of that change. Serving as both writer and educator throughout his career, Chew's thoughts have been widely disseminated amongst Singaporeans of his own generation. In his stories of home, attitudes towards race relations, education and family dynamics are all put on display—and these are some of the areas that have formed the biggest shifts in Singaporean life during the years Chew has been writing. His observations are made in a way that is typical of his time and educational background, spoken in the calm voice of a Chinese scholar that has all but disappeared from the younger generations of Singaporeans.

In translating these stories into English, we open up Chew's memories and experiences of Singapore in its early stages as an independent nation, as told by a member of the first generation to grow up in a Singapore whose fate was tied much less firmly to that of its neighbours. The mix of confidence and misgivings, often told with a self-effacing, good-natured sense of humour, typifies the views of the world and the self that are often seen in the speech and writings of that generation of post-independence Singaporeans. This English version not only makes Chew's reflections available to a wider international audience, but also preserves it for a generation of Singaporeans increasingly distanced from writings in Chinese. It is my hope that, in doing so, younger Singaporeans will enjoy insights into a past that has shaped their surroundings in ways they may not have realised, and also appreciate the changes their home nation and the surrounding region have been through in a remarkably short time.

Chew was a recipient of Singapore's Cultural Medallion award in 1999. This award was instituted 20 years earlier, and is the highest honour conferred in Singapore on those who have achieved excellence in dance, theatre, literature, music, photography, art and film. The award is administered by the National Arts Council and, since 2006, has been conferred by the president of Singapore. The Cultural Medallion recognises individuals who have attained artistic excellence and made a distinct contribution to Singapore's arts and culture. With the support of the NAC, over the past two years Epigram Books has undertaken to translate 10 titles written by Cultural Medallion winners, including this volume of Chew Kok Chang's short stories. The stories are representative of the work of one of Singapore's most prolific writers, and we hope this sample

will help readers gain an appreciation of the breadth of work Chew has produced over the years.

I am very pleased that Edmund Wee, Woo Wei-Ling and the rest of the team at Epigram Books have undertaken this project, and that they have allowed me to be a part of it.

SHELLY BRYANT

Other Cities, Other Lives

Pixiu

“MY SURNAME IS Jin, like the word for gold. You can call me Xiao Jin or Lao Jin; whichever you prefer is fine with me. The most important thing is, let’s all go out and really enjoy ourselves. And hopefully when we go home, we’ll have a windfall.”

The guy talking was Jin, our tour guide. There were a dozen or so people in the group, all travelling together in a tour organised by his agency. We were setting out for a four-day, three-night shopping spree and visit to the hot springs in Taipei. My wife and I joined this tour primarily because for some time, our travels had mostly been in Mainland China. It had been more than 20 years since we had last set foot on Taiwanese soil. After this sort of long separation, it always seems good to make another visit. Chinese cities such as Beijing and Shanghai changed so rapidly that every visit offered dazzling sights. We figured there would be changes in Taipei as well.

So, following Jin’s lead, we visited the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, the National Revolutionary Martyrs’ Shrine, the National Palace Museum, Chiufen, Beitou Hot Springs, the Shilin Night Market, and all the usual spots. We found that the changes in Taipei were not nearly as significant as those encountered in cities on the Mainland, though of course the towering Taipei 101 was a fresh sight.

Another thing is that, in Mainland China, no matter where one

goes, joining a tour group means that one will be led by the nose to the places the guide wants to go, even if it's not particularly to the travellers' tastes. None of us were willing to be consumed by impractical expenses, nor did we want to waste a single minute of our precious time. We didn't want to let some physician give us a free diagnosis, nor did we want to discern the genuine from the false in markets dedicated to pearls and jewels, fabrics, or tea leaves, our anxiety growing with each sales pitch as we tried to pick out which ones to trust. Aware of this, Jin—or perhaps the agency that had arranged for him to lead us—took care of us to our satisfaction. Over the span of a couple of days, all that we saw was according to what had been laid out on the itinerary. There were no surprise stops at shops, nor were there any activities aimed at 'increasing our general knowledge'.

In talking about Jin, everyone shared the impression that he gave us a reason to rejoice. He wore gold-rimmed glasses, and had an air of refinement about him. His demeanour was that of a typical middle-aged fellow. As for his knowledge, he was better than the average guide. He had a ready answer for every question, and he could be quite eloquent. He was especially expressive when he spoke about *fengshui*, a field of which he possessed expansive knowledge. He could tell numerous stories related to the topic all in a single breath. I remember the first time he spoke of *fengshui*. It was right after we had visited the Imperial Palace.

"Just now, you saw so many things. What do you think was the most important thing to take note of?" he asked as soon as we'd boarded the bus.

"Three-layered meat!" called out one of the travellers.

"Right," said Jin. "That's definitely one of the treasures of human-

kind. It's exactly like real meat. You've seen it for yourself now. It really is an eye-opener."

Another of the tourists offered his perspective. "That bak choy also looked just like the real thing."

"Right again," said Jin. "Especially the grass worm on top of it. It looked like it was alive. In fact, its craftsmanship is so exquisite, it's even better than the real thing. Also, did anyone notice the mythical beasts on display in the cabinet, the *pixiu*?"

Everyone said, "Yes." Actually, before we'd gotten off the bus to visit the site, Jin had already briefly mentioned the pair of collectibles. He said the *pixiu* was something along the lines of a dragon, a qilin, or a phoenix. It didn't really exist. The *pixiu* here included both a male and a female. The male was called Tianlu. When he told us the female's name, it was masked by the sound of Taipei's traffic, so I didn't hear it clearly. After that, I didn't bother about it any further, since I wasn't particularly interested in asking Jin about it. But he placed great emphasis on one point: this sort of beast, spoken of in the classic text *Guangyun*, had no anus. He went on to ask, "Do you know what the lack of an anus represents?"

When we all shook our heads, he continued in an unhurried manner, "It simply means that what goes in does not come out. Wealth can enter, and once it does, it's there to stay. When you think about it, it's pretty good, isn't it? It means that with the blessing of this sort of auspicious creature, you're sure to strike it big. But it certainly doesn't mean that as soon as you acquire the lucky beast, it will automatically bring you wealth. You've got to pay attention to two things. Most important is where you place it in the home. This leads to the consideration of *fengshui*."

“Then what’s the other thing?” one of the visitors asked enthusiastically.

“This is also important. After you’re lucky enough to buy the *pixiu*, you need to invite a master to do some chanting. This situation is like beads or a statue that needs a Buddhist monk to invite the spirit into it. Otherwise, they are only normal handicrafts, nothing with any spiritual significance.” He swept his eyes over his audience, who sat listening with mouths opened wide in wonder, then added meaningfully, “Actually, you can find a *pixiu* at any old craft shop on the street if you look. It’s like a dragon, but without the scales, or like a lion but with some hair missing from its legs. In fact, these creatures can ward off evil spirits. But if you buy them without proper consideration and put them in your home, you not only won’t attract any luck, but you might actually invite ill fortune. So you really have to be extra careful.”

I had already privately decided to buy a pair of *pixiu* to take home, if I chanced upon them at a roadside vendor’s stall. Now, upon hearing Jin’s warnings, I had to abandon the impulse, since it was too clever for my own good.

In the blink of an eye, our few days of sightseeing came to an end. On the day before we were to bid farewell to Jin, just after lunch we went to watch a demonstration in front of the presidential palace that had arisen over elections pitting the Green Party against the Blue. At first, we thought this was the reason the bus was going back to the hotel, but who knew it was in fact making its way to a shop that was not on the itinerary. When the bus stopped, I fixed my eyes on a shop. Jin raised his voice and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, for your convenience, I’ve especially arranged to bring you to a Taipei shop that has exclusive rights to sell the *pixiu*. Please alight and browse freely amongst the wide selection of goods available for you to choose from.”

Longjing Tea

HAVING TOURED HANGZHOU’S West Lake, I assumed we were travelling straight back to Shanghai, but how could we refuse when our guide, Xiao Liu, said, “We’ve still got some time. I’m thinking of adding a little something for all of you that is not on our itinerary.”

“What do you have in mind?” one of the more astute travellers asked.

Xiao Liu did not answer directly, but only said, “Everyone always says, ‘When you go to Hangzhou, if you don’t become acquainted with the famous longjing tea and you don’t take any home with you, it’s as good as not having been to Hangzhou at all.’”

Several of the passengers on the bus looked at one another and smiled, but did not say what was on their minds: We know. It’s just as expected; he wants to earn a little commission off us.

Actually, I had been to Hangzhou many times, including several times with tour groups. I had never been able to escape being dragged to some tea plantations or teahouses to buy tea leaves. Of course it was not surprising when it happened on this trip too.

My wife added, “That’s fine. It’s good to be able to adapt to circumstances. Anyway, we’ve travelled a long way already, and I’m thirsty. Let’s go drink a free cup of tea and see how it goes from there.”

“Just drink and not buy?” I said, narrowing my eyes at her.

She replied, "I guess that depends on how much self-control each of us has."

As she finished saying that, our guides brought us to the entrance of the tea plantation. After that, it was the same as always. We were led to a room that was big enough to accommodate dozens of people. When the person in charge of explaining the history of tea came into the room, our eyes brightened involuntarily. It was not because she was especially stunning, but because her skin was so fair and her cheeks so rosy, and she was so spirited that you could almost believe she would break out in song and dance at any moment, despite the fact that she was already in her forties.

Her opening remarks were out of the ordinary. She did not talk about tea, but about her experience when she was invited to taste and evaluate tea in Singapore. Like nearly every foreigner who had ever travelled to the Garden City, she did not fail to praise its appearance. Her listeners were bursting with joy.

After that, she said to her audience that in a single year, she would travel several times to all of the countries in Asia. Why? Because she was not an ordinary hostess of the tea company, who simply gave explanations and demonstrations about tea. She was a professional. She was an expert in longjing tea, having practically attained omniscience. She said that, at West Lake, no matter who you asked, everyone knew who she was. She had grown up in Hangzhou, on her own family's tea plantation. Unless she was overseas, you could go to any tea plantation and ask any of the workers you met for advice, and that worker would bring you to our hostess's house.

And there was more. Her family had been Chinese physicians for six generations, and so each generation benefitted from this heritage. All of them had grown up knowing about tea, especially longjing

tea, and its health benefits.

When I had listened up to this point, I thought, This woman is certainly not like other people. My respect and confidence in her increased.

We sniffed and tasted the tea as we learned a little more about the differences in fragrance, appearance and price of longjing tea picked before the rain and after a downpour. One of the good-quality blends was valued at more than 2,000 yuan per half kilogram. One of the wealthier travellers bought up the only available kilo, spending more than 4,000 yuan. Several others bought a half kilo here or there, rushing to buy the inferior products. The professional hostess with the pedigree in Chinese medicine looked on in delight, overwhelmed with joy.

Just then, one of the travellers asked, "I've got high blood pressure and early-stage diabetes. Can I drink longjing tea?"

"Oh, it'll be perfect for that," the tea expert said. "My grandmother is 70 or 80 years old, and she also has these two illnesses. She drank longjing tea for a period of time and, just like that, the two illnesses were both cured."

Then my wife whispered to me, "If there are six generations of Chinese physicians in their family, and they're such experts on tea and drink it every day, how come her grandmother got high blood pressure and diabetes?"

Just as I was about to answer, I was fiercely stared down and shushed by one fellow traveller next to me. I had no choice but to bite my tongue.

On Huaihai Road

RECENTLY, IT SEEMS that everyone has been making his or her way to Shanghai. Before the beginning of the Year of the Goat, a friend of mine, a Chinese businessman, said that if he wanted to go travelling, it was quite difficult to get air tickets. So when he was deliberating over his travel plans, he finally decided to travel to Shanghai, although he had the impression that Shanghai was, as he put it, a city that was covered in dust.

So after a plane ride through the clouds, he made his way to Shanghai's Huaihai Road.

It was a very long road. Walking along it was very similar to walking on Singapore's Orchard Road, and he immediately felt that this city had undergone too big a change. For instance, just a moment earlier, he had gone into a bookstore to buy a book, and had wanted to buy all of the volumes and carry them home. There were so many books, and the packaging was also absolutely beautiful. Before, 10 or 20 years earlier, it had not been like this at all. Thinking of the trouble he would have to go to in bringing them home, he limited himself to a few. He carried them in his hand now.

He stopped where he was, looking around him. A pair of people walked toward him, one old and one young, one male and one female. From the way they were dressed, they did not look like beggars, but

when they stood in front of him, the man said, "Can you help us, please? Give my daughter a little money to buy something to eat. She's starving."

Hearing the man say this, my friend suddenly thought of the five cakes he had bought at a bakery a little earlier. He had only eaten one of them, and was saving the rest, but he took those out and gave them to the father and daughter.

They accepted his gift, but did not look particularly pleased with it. In fact, they looked a little disappointed as they turned and shuffled away. For him, he just stood where he was and watched the shape of their backs as they walked off.

What really surprised him was that, after walking some distance along the road, the father suddenly threw the bag of cakes into a rubbish bin. To confirm that the bag was not empty, my friend walked over and looked, and he was not wrong. What was clear was that the pair, father and daughter, were not really looking for food.

Perhaps it was coincidence, but as he continued walking down this busy, flourishing main road, another pair, a young man and woman, walked over to him and said, "Sir, can you help us?" It was the woman who spoke first this time.

"What's wrong?" he asked, looking them over.

"It's like this," the man began. He was wearing a suit and tie. "My wife and I are from outside Shanghai, and we came here looking for work. Before we even found a job, I lost my wallet, and now we can't get home. Can you loan us a little money to buy a bus ticket home?"

The woman stood beside him, nodding her head constantly.

As for my friend, he just shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm just a tourist, and I don't have much cash with me. I can't help you."

As he spoke, he was looking for a way out. He thought, “Everything I said is true. After all, you can’t tell a person’s heart and mind just by looking at his face. Who knows what their situation is, or whether you can believe anything they say?”

But that couple followed him patiently, staying right on his tail. They did not stop asking for money, and he began to feel harassed. He walked faster, and finally left them behind.

So he made his way into a little park and sat down to rest. He flipped through the books he had just bought. One of them was something he picked up just because it had struck him as a little odd. It was thick, about 480 pages long. It was written by a retired police officer, and the title was *Uncovering the Secrets of the Urban Street Swindler*.

In *Other Cities, Other Lives*, travelogues are populated with swindlers and enterprising tour guides, where nothing is as it seems. Closer to home, stories capture husbands, wives and children struggling with upheaval in the family. Told in the elegant, spare style of a Chinese scholar, Chew's micro-fiction reflects the voice of his generation, living through a time of immense change in the region. This is the first collection of his writing to be translated into English.



CHEW KOK CHANG has published more than one hundred works, including poetry, novellas, short stories, essays and children's books. Born in 1934 in Guangdong, he is also known by various pen names including Zhou Can, Qiu Ling, Yu Yin, Lin Zhongyue, Zhou Zhixian and Zhou Aijia. His awards include the National Book Development Council of Singapore Book Awards for Poetry and Children's and Youth Literature, the Singapore Chinese Literature Award and the Cultural Medallion.

SHELLY BRYANT is the translator of Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls*, which was published by Penguin Books and long-listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize. She is also the author of four volumes of poetry and two travel guides on Suzhou and Shanghai. Her translations of Sheng Keyi's novel *Death Fugue* for Giramondo Press in Australia, and tennis player Li Na's memoirs for Penguin Books, are forthcoming.

