Anyone acquainted with modern detective fiction will instantly find familiar elements in most of the stories collected and translated here. Unlike the so-called crime-case fiction popular in dynastic China, the majority of these stories feature a detective fully intended to be a Chinese version of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes—complete with a fondness for tobacco, well-kept bachelor quarters in the middle of a bustling city, and a partner-narrator the equivalent of Dr. Watson. In contrast to the traditional wise and righteous judge solving cases as an authority figure presiding over a host of underlings, and alternately manipulating and intimidating those brought before him, here we encounter Huo Sang, a crime solver whose superior intellect and attitude, rather than any ascribed authority, are what enable him to solve his cases. As someone functioning in the social milieu of a large modern metropolis, he is a nearly exact counterpart of Holmes, even though he and his partner, Bao Lang, live on Aiwen Road in Shanghai rather than on Baker Street in London. Like Holmes, Huo Sang cuts through superstition or preconceptions by employing incisive reasoning based on factual evidence obtained through meticulous investigation, quite in keeping with the early-twentieth-century drive to instill in Chinese readers a more scientific approach to solving problems. Using detective fiction to do so makes the lesson effortless, even enjoyable.

Indeed, Cheng Xiaoqing, whose skill in producing these accounts of Huo Sang’s adventures far eclipsed that of all other Chinese writers of popular detective fiction in his time, has said in retrospect that he considers his stories “textbooks in disguise,” devised to awaken readers to the advantages of careful observation and rigorous reasoning. Why, then, would he need to disguise them? The answer has everything to do with the character of native Chinese
fiction, from China’s dynastic past through most of the first quarter of the twentieth century, when Cheng Xiaoqing developed from a translator of the Conan Doyle stories into a writer who was obviously stimulated by what he had read in English and subsequently rendered into Chinese. In the first decade of the twentieth century, as David Pollard tells us, “there occurred in Chinese language publications the rare phenomenon of translated works of fiction exceeding in number original works of fiction.”¹ In the case of Cheng, his translations, having undergone a certain adaptation, became essentially indistinguishable from contemporary native creations. In the cosmopolitan Shanghai of the time, this would have been easier to do than in any other part of China.

The rare phenomenon to which Pollard refers has much to do with China’s efforts to modernize from the late-Qing dynasty in the first decades of the Republican period, which began in 1912. After over a half-century of trying to resist the West and their cultural incursions, the Chinese were finally compelled to try to learn what the West was all about culturally. Fiction—translated directly from Western languages and secondarily from Japanese—was a natural means to do so. Detective fiction, which provided an escape expected from traditional fiction as well as the “renovation” so ardently called for by China’s reformers of the time, became the perfect medium to introduce what was then considered Western thinking to the Chinese. Adaptation from traditional fiction, however, did nothing to address the problem of the readers’ attitudes; for traditional fiction in China, despite all its achievements, had never earned the general respect commensurate with its popularity. Detective fiction, which Cheng Xiaoqing clearly stated was “made up,” was never admitted into the company of those socially critical “modern” works of fiction designed to say directly what was wrong with the nation, in contrast to Cheng’s stories, which were written in part to show how his readers could improve their country by improving themselves.

The fact that Cheng, who achieved a popularity in Shanghai reminiscent of Conan Doyle’s in London, could be relegated to the status of a peripheral writer can be attributed to the continuation of traditional attitudes, which considered all invented narratives to be minor, and hence easily forgettable. Never mind that Cheng was “shanghaiing” Sherlock, turning a foreign icon into a completely natural inhabitant of China’s most modern metropolis and easily acceptable as a native hero, even though the institution of private investigators was unknown there. He was still categorized with purveyors of escape narratives known pejoratively as “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” or “Saturday” fictional narratives considered decidedly inferior to those of such writers as Lu Xun (1881–1936) or Mao Dun (1896–1981), who wrote for political ends, and who denigrated the motive to entertain as subversive of the nation’s efforts to modernize. Lu Xun took up writing in order to “change the spirit” of his countrymen; and Mao Dun once declared that what China needed was “a fiction of blood and tears.”

As at least one modern scholar has pointed out, “the impetus for fiction translation in the late Qing [shortly before and after the turn of the twentieth century] was non-literary. Translation was needed in this mass education movement to carry out the necessary knowledge transfer and cultural transfer; that the instrument happened to be literary was initially coincidental.”

What Cheng was attempting in his stories about Huo Sang and Bao Lang in order to achieve this knowledge and cultural transfer was really another kind of translation. By affirming rather than negating the translations of Western detective fiction done by many others since the 1890s, however, his stories further advanced the more natural use of entertainment as an educational tool than his “serious” contemporaries ever realized. For what he ultimately contributed, both to Chinese fiction in the modern world and to reshaping the understanding and acceptance of “scientific” thought, Cheng deserves far more credit—and attention—than has been given him. With the exception of “The Ghost in the Villa,” a very short story he pub-

lished in 1947, the stories collected here represent the first translations of his writings available to readers of English, or of any other non-Chinese language.3

These stories, on the other hand, show that Cheng Xiaqing was a writer who did not simply ignore his native traditions, including those traditions connected with storytelling. While the opening three, “The Shoe,” “The Other Photograph,” and “The Odd Tenant,” can be taken as fairly direct transfers of Sherlock Holmes stories from a Victorian English to a Republican Chinese setting, the next selection, “The Examination Paper,” tries to account for the deep friendship between Huo Sang and Bao Lang, showing that it was not exactly identical to the Sherlock Holmes–John Watson relationship. “On the Huangpu” introduces the shadowy character known as the South-China Swallow, a rather romanticized individual who operates as much outside the law as Huo Sang and Bao Lang do within it, in order to achieve identical social goals. The South-China Swallow, who appears without Huo and Bao in “At the Ball,” is reminiscent of Robin Hood in the West and of traditional Chinese heroes from such works of fiction as the Three Gallants and Five Altruists (Sanxia wuyi) or the Water Margin (Shuihu zhuan), even though he fights with his mind rather than with a sword. In “Cat’s-Eye,” he becomes much more Huo Sang’s collaborator than his nemesis.

Thus, it would be neither fair nor accurate to classify Cheng Xiaqing, who never left Chinese soil, as a simple westernizer. Rather, these stories have been selected to demonstrate that, like so many modern Chinese intellectual patriots, Cheng did not, like his better-known contemporaries, essentially reject his nation’s past, even though he clearly wished to adapt it to modern realities. This is abundantly evident in “One Summer Night,” placed last because it contains none of the characters for which he is known. Even with its traditionalist references—such as a gall bladder bursting from fright—the story makes it clear that, here too, Cheng is enjoining his countrymen to look behind assumptions and appearances in order to discover the truth. In choosing to do so through the medium of crime fiction, he,

perhaps more than all others assigned to obscurity because what they wrote mostly entertained, deserves to be noted in any history of twentieth-century Chinese fiction. I hope further that the stories gathered here will help to break down the misleading and artificial barrier between the fiction of traditional and modern China that has been such an obstacle to understanding China's native tradition of fiction making as a whole.

T.C.W.