New and Old;
Paradise and Perdition
The New and the Old

In the developed world today, unlike China in the 1930s, nostalgia so often makes us favor tradition above modernity that one is tempted to read “The New and the Old” (“Xin yu jiu”) as a tale of paradise lost. But why did Shen Congwen embody tradition in a beardsman (i.e., a decapitator), a figure from old China that his Westernizing generation of intellectuals, notably Lu Xun, found shameful? Lu Xun’s recoil at “backward” and “uncivilized” behavior is now so widely shared that today it is Chinese cultural conservatives who decry Shen’s story, for “putting China’s old culture in a bad light.”

The difference is that Shen Congwen could see executioners as his ancestors saw them. An older relative of his was a beardsman; Shen Congwen as a child was proud of him, and in 1980 Shen still liked to demonstrate the technique. So “The New and the Old” probably is nostalgic. The era designated in the story ended at about the time Shen’s childhood memory began, when Zhen’gan, the small town of his birth (today called Fenghuang), was still inhabited mostly by soldiers and their families. Owing to Miao rebellions a century earlier, it was the center of a Military Preparedness Circuit, a special unit of government below the province with troops under its own command, some of whom farmed public colony fields out in the country and manned nearby forts in case of war. But, by the time of the story, West Hunan’s soldiers were as anachronistic as masterless samurai in a Kurosawa film. Beheadings by then partook of the decorum of civil society; the strange custom at the temple of the city god is a real one, witnessed in Yuanzhou as late as the 1920s.

Yet, when Shen Congwen wrote, he was not only a modernizer himself but a transcendental and relativist thinker, post-Kantian and post-Nietzschean – or post-Zhuangzian, he would have preferred to say, since his story “Knowledge” argues that Zhuangzi transcends Nietzsche. Shen Congwen said that Beauty was his God, a God that is not dead, and that Beauty exists in things apparently ugly, primitive, even abhorrent. Beheading, done well and in the proper spirit,
may embody such Beauty. Shen Congwen actually beckons us to look beyond custom, to embrace a truly transcendental morality that finds more Beauty in a spiritually examined Life than in the rationally examined life prized by the West.

This story, written in the summer of 1935, has a topical meaning, too. By implication, it condemns the New Life movement, a 1934–1935 mass campaign of Chiang Kai-shek’s that revived ancient moral maxims – in form, without the spirit – to modernize China and make it resistant to Communist revolutionaries such as the victims in this story. Hence, narrowing the field to politics, another subject of the story is hypocritical neotraditionalism: the false project of restoring a paradise that never was.
During a year in the reign of the Guangxu Emperor, 1875–1908. . . .

Horses were being raced in this little county town, across parade grounds drenched by the sun in shimmering yellow. Meanwhile men in military garb, outfitted in all the colors of the rainbow, gathered before the Martial Demonstration Hall to rehearse the eighteen different disciplines of the martial arts. It fell to the circuit intendant in this season of Frost’s Descent\(^1\) to inspect the drills as tradition required, set the ranks in order, announce promotions and demotions, and confer rewards and punishments. And so this army, of the Military Preparedness Circuit commanding the frontier prefectures of Chenzhou, Yuanzhou, Yongzhou, and Jingzhou, was stepping up its drills in preparation for examinations. Seated on folding chairs in front of the Martial Demonstration Hall, the patrol commander and drill instructor drank tea from covered bowls and called the roll from a register in red covers. Each soldier could select the gear that best suited him and have a crack at wielding his weapon, solo or against an opponent. When it came to the competitions on horseback, the mounts were given free rein to gallop like the wind, while the men demonstrated their skill at knocking off balls with long lances or revolved in the saddle to show off their archery – “puncturing the willow leaf” from a hundred paces. Each won hurrahs or jeers according to his prowess.

Warrior Yang Jinbiao\(^2\) was under the command of the Miao Defense Colony-Field Affairs Office, Second Company. He had just hit some targets from horseback with his lance; now he was returning to the Martial Demonstration Hall to

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\(^1\)The beginning of the eleventh month.

\(^2\)“Yang of the Golden Banner.”

*Translated by Jeffrey Kinkley*
find a partner to take him on in “twin swords break the shields.” Although the sword-wielding opponent demonstrated great skill and ferocity, Warrior Yang rolled and tum-
bled hither and yon with his leather shields. It seemed no blow of the sword could touch him, nor even a drop of water.

Just as the heat of battle was rising, a military courier clad in a red tunic rushed up and stood before the upturned eaves to report: “Yang Jinbiao, Yang Jinbiao, you have official business at the yamen. Come to the city wall, West Gate, at a quarter till noon to await further instructions!”

Hearing his orders, the soldier intentionally waited for a climactic moment to fall to the ground, as if felled by the sword of his opponent. Quickly he threw down his shields and came over to report. When the courier had left and Yang went to the stables to catch his breath, the others swarmed around him like bees. All knew that there would be a trial today at noon and that, at the appointed time, Yang would have to march out through the West Gate and cut off a man’s head. Warrior Yang was known to them not only as a comrade on the drilling field and in the barracks but also as a servant of the big civil yamen in town. For he was not just skilled on foot and horseback; he was the most distinguished headsman in the district.

After the noon meal, the soldier donned his dress black tunic with the twin cloud design and wrapped his head in a crepe silk turban. Then he took his foot-long devil-headed sword through the West Gate to receive his assignment. Precisely at noon, three shots from “little piglet” cannon sounded from within the city. Soon after, a troop of men and horses dragged forth a man struck dumb with terror. He knelt facing west in the center of the grounds to await his sentence. Holding the devil-headed sword like a dagger, thrust backward to conceal it in the crook of his arm, Yang went to the tribunal’s mat-shaded shelter, bowed deeply before the inspector of executions, hands at his sides, and inquired as to the imperial will. Then, with permission to
proceed, he strode behind the criminal and paused a moment to take stock. A brush of his arm against the nape of the convict’s neck, with the sword below coming straight down on it like a guillotine, sent the head falling to earth with a dull thud. The crowd of soldiers and civilians roared as one (they were applauding how he dispatched the man with a single blow), but this soldier had duties yet to perform; he ran head down, oblivious to everything, straight to the temple of the city god.

There he thrice kowtowed before the god, as was the custom, and quickly hid under the incense altar before the god, silent as could be, to await the next act.

Soon His Honor the county magistrate likewise honored custom by entering to offer incense to the god, his retinue of lictors proceeding in advance with gongs to clear the way. The incense presented, a fleet-footed scout rushed in, breathlessly, and knelt to report: “I beg leave to inform Your Honor, a commoner has been killed by the stream outside the West Gate – beheaded, in an affair most bloody. The whereabouts of the culprit are unknown.”

Although the magistrate had signed the writ of execution in red with his own brush, clear as could be, just a short while before, he again followed tradition by pretending amazement, as if he had no knowledge of the event. “Can such a thing happen in broad daylight?” he shouted, rapping his gavel.

Thereupon he sent runners throughout the city to find the culprit, enjoining them to bring the man immediately to justice. Others he ordered to make ready the case so that the criminal could be interrogated before the god. When the soldier-executioner reckoned that the magistrate had taken his seat, he quickly crawled out from under the god’s throne and knelt before him to confess and request punishment. He reported his identity and his origins, allowed as how the man outside the West Gate was his victim, and presented the bloodied sword in evidence.
Rapping his gavel, the magistrate began the interrogation with a great show of pomp and severity. The executioner came forth with all sorts of explanations for the killing, all the while kowtowing to His Honor and begging for mercy. At the end, continuously sounding his gavel, the magistrate shouted out to his runners to "severely punish this ignorant country fellow with forty blows of the red bamboo rod!" Clutching the executioner and forcing him down on the stone-cold brick floor, they counted out the blows by fives, "five, ten, fifteen, twenty," in reality delivering only eight blows, whereupon they respectfully informed His Honor that the whipping had been carried out. A runner handed the magistrate an envelope, which he in turn flung before the executioner. The soldier kowtowed in gratitude as he picked up his remuneration, repeatedly wishing this "eminent dispenser of justice" a "prominent and rewarding career." When all the necessary procedures had been performed before His Eminence the city god, His Honor the county magistrate returned to his yamen.

Since the tragedy had to unfold in just this way, the adage that "being an official is acting a part in a play" was not far off the mark. Legal and religious rites combined to make a drama, and the result was just as entertaining. For remote border areas are ruled jointly by men and gods; they can be controlled only when the two cooperate. Even such affairs as this were regarded very cautiously by the townspeople and the executioner. To the headsman, the admonitory forty blows of the bamboo rod seemed particularly significant. The rulers were determined to demonstrate to the citizens that even an executioner who served the officials sinned when he killed – bore some responsibility to the deceased. But this sin was brought openly before the gods and could be exorcised by the bamboo. This already being a tradition, it would of course be carefully preserved, until all social institutions collapsed or were reformed.

An executioner earned a third of a tael of silver for each
head he severed. The soldier who received the emoluments necessarily invited his brothers in the ranks to a feast of meat and wine after his return to camp. He told them about the knack of beheading and all about the victim and how he took it. He also amused the crowd by mimicking the bureaucratic airs of the magistrate as he had just seen him in the temple of the city god.

“Warrior Yang Jinbiao, hath thou not heard that, when a prince violates the law, he is punished in the same degree as any commoner? Yet you, a soldier, dared to murder a man with your own sword in broad daylight!”

“Your Honor, Paragon of Justice, have mercy – ”

“By the gods above, confess before me!”

“Your Honor, Paragon of Justice, have mercy – ”

Yelling out to have at him, the soldiers gathered round and pounced, poking and chopping at Yang Jinbiao with their chopsticks.

Yang Jinbiao was twenty-four and a bachelor. He cut a fine, healthy figure of a soldier, being free and without a care. He was known for his generosity and skill in all things. He had dreams of future glory: “A tower a mile high must start from the ground.” His companions in the ranks, too, felt he was not a fellow to be underestimated.

In the eighteenth year of the Republic, 1929. . .

The era changed; the last emperor’s power was overthrown by the revolutionary party, and the miracle of the famous Qing dynasty headsman who beheaded six people in a trice without leaving any skin dangling would never happen again. But, when the era changed and “the court” became “the government,” the local methods of killing became crueler. Small though the town was, it would usually dispatch eight or ten people at a time. The bravest and most dashing man around couldn’t get through so many if they were as easy to slice as cucumbers. So the authorities just lined up
the people and shot them. Yang Jinbiao became the old soldier guarding the North Gate, the one who bolted and locked it at night. His days of glory were past; as the seasons went by, he and his profession were slowly but completely forgotten.

Already sixty, Yang Jinbiao lived alone in a little gatehouse. On his wall still hung two leather shields, a matched pair of “tiger-head swords” with curved tips sharp as hooks, an old Guangdong Arsenal-style musket, and a pair of daggers—all the treasures that had made him fall in love with his profession in his earlier days. There were also a pair of poles, a forked spear, and a scoop net, all for fishing. His calabash was often half filled with strong corn liquor. And the precious sword that had beheaded so many people hung at the head of his bed. Thirty years before, it was said that the sword delivered a portent one day before the yamen was to order an execution. Now that the Republic had come and the sword lay unused, the portents came no more. But, when the sword was pulled from its scabbard, even today it gave off a terrifying, cold gleam, as if unwilling yet to despair of itself. On the edge of its blade could still be seen many a semicircular bloodstain that would not come off with grinding. Having nothing to do during the day, the old soldier took it with him to the top of the city wall, where he sat on a rusted cannon in the battery, stroking and admiring the sword as he basked in the warm sunlight. And, when he was in the mood, he put it through a few exercises.

Also stationed in the gate tower was a platoon of regular soldiers charged with defending the city. All troops in the city had long since been reorganized under the modern military system. But the old soldier still went to the Miao Defense Colony-Field Affairs Office monthly to receive his two and eight-tenths taels of silver compensation as a “warrior,” plus old-style grain ration tickets. The silver was paid at the market price in currency, while the ration coupons
could be exchanged for 8.4 pecks\(^3\) of grain in the hull. His duty was to open the city gate in the morning and close and bolt it at night, which he did on his own initiative.

Being a drinker, he often went over to Butcher Yang’s table to chat and wash his wine down with a bowl of soup flavored with pork bone marrow. Or he’d go to the table of Butcher Sha, the Muslim, and carry back a sheep’s head or sheep’s stomach to enjoy at home. He knew something of herbal medicine, so, whenever someone came down with a blister or a boil, he was happy to go off into the countryside to pick the healing plants. And, being a good fisherman, he often went by himself up to the mill embankment to fish in the reservoir. When his catch was stewed, he would carry it in its earthenware casserole up to the other soldiers in the gate tower, and they would all feast raucously together, playing the guess-fingers game as they drank.

In the dog days of summer, when it was hot as a bamboo steaming basket, he still lay down in a ventilated spot of the gate tower and snored away. While the soldiers practiced Chinese boxing, making him itch to join them, he, too, would take up his antique shields and practice “seizing the spear,” “bringing down the flying-wedge yoked troika by cutting down the end horse at the knees,” and other quaint exercises.

At the foot of the wall flowed a long stream. Innumerable women with bamboo baskets on their backs came from the city to wash their clothes there, pounding them with wooden rollers. Others stood midstream to rinse cotton yarn, the rolled-up legs of their trousers revealing the pale white calves of their legs. Upstream a short distance was a row of stepping stones spanning the river like a centipede. People coming to market from the Miao villages, others headed for the countryside to collect rent, still others coming to town to have their fortunes told – hay cutters, fish fry

\(^3\)Eighty-four liters.
peddlers, bearers of messages or of manure – all passed over the stepping stones in a ceaseless parade lasting the whole day long. The vegetable gardens across the stream were Miao property; the glistening green plots, all laid out in neat squares, presented a beautiful prospect. Hillocks luxuriant with trees lay beyond the truck gardens. There were two main roads, one wending its way over the hills, the other following the river upstream. Both led into Miao country.

At the foot of the city wall was a clearing where firewood and fodder were exchanged; hence, there were also stalls selling beef entrails and others selling baba corn cakes and a soup of fermented glutinous rice. And there were several sheds with the furnaces of blacksmiths, who beat out every kind of sickle, firewood hatchet, and yellow-eel-tailed dagger, exclusively for sale to the country folk who came to the city to sell their firewood and hay.

When he was not fishing in the reservoir or drinking at Butcher Yang’s, the old soldier sat atop the rusted cannon in the city wall, watching all the people come and go. Or he turned to look at the city in back, at the playground and classrooms of the primary school. The school was run by a young couple. From on top of the wall he could see very clearly when the children were having their lessons and when they were enjoying recess. They seemed to like their teachers, and the teachers loved their students. Sometimes the woman teacher brought her children up on top of the wall to play. When she saw the old soldier with his shields, she would ask him to go through his motions to amuse the children. (The tiger eyes painted on the leather shields so filled them with wonder and delight that, once the children had seen them, they would often sneak off to the old soldier’s home for a look on their way home from school.) Sometimes as he watched them play soccer on the playground, the old soldier on top of the wall would bellow out encouragement to the losing side.
The New and the Old

The old soldier rose early one morning, at the onset of the season of Frost's Descent. Seeing the fine weather and that so many people were busy with the traditional autumn housecleaning, he decided to give his own place a thorough scrub. He rolled up his sleeves and wrapped a colorful turban around his head. Then he moved all his things out of his room, made several trips to the river to bring up water, and set about scrubbing every wall and floor in turn. He was just going at it when the platoon commander suddenly appeared. The old soldier was to hurry to the yamen with his short sword. Urgent business awaited him.

At the yamen he found the adjutant of the day in his red sash. After quizzing the old soldier a bit and having him pull out his sword for a look, the adjutant ordered him to hurry outside the West Gate.

It all happened in such a rush, in such chaos, that the old soldier thought he was dreaming. Everything was hazy in this dream; he couldn't verify any of it, so he did run outside the West Gate. He saw no tribunal, no shed for the officers, not a single spectator. Apart from some dogs out in the open field, he saw only a dyer who'd been toting a load of white cloth, resting by the side of a pile of manure. Nothing gave any clue that an execution was about to take place. The sky was bright and clear. A magpie, shaking its long tail, flew overhead.

"Are they still killing people here in this day and age?" wondered the old soldier. "Am I dreaming?" Across the meadow was a tiny brook where children played. They were collecting stones and catching shrimp, with their book bags laid out on top of the pile of dried cow manure. The old soldier recognized them all from the primary school inside the North Gate, so he went over to address them.

"Young gentlemen, young gentlemen, better hurry and leave. Someone's about to be executed here!"

The children raised their heads all at once and laughed, "What, who're they gonna kill? Who told you?"

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“Was I dreaming after all?” thought the old soldier. Seeing that the dyer was about to spread out his cloth on the meadow to dry, the old soldier went over to speak to him next.

“Master dyer, you must gather up your cloth. This is no place to dry it. There is going to be an execution here!”

Like the children, the dyer paid him no attention. He, too, laughed: “A killing? How’s that? How do you know?”

“Could it really have been a dream?” thought the old soldier. “How should I know who’s to be executed? If this really is a dream, I’ll kill the next one I see.”

As he prepared to return to town to inquire, he heard trumpets blaring the signal to charge. So they really were going to execute someone. The troops had already passed through the wall. One turn and they would be here. In a daze, the old soldier ran back to the center of the field. The troops had come. They quickly and silently formed a circle, each man raising his rifle and pointing outward as if ready to fire. Sure enough, there were two young people, bound and kneeling in the meadow, their faces deathly white. One was a man and the other a woman. Their faces seemed very familiar at first glance, but in the commotion he couldn’t quite think why. An officer on horseback, holding the arrow with a pennant that in the past had symbolized the emperor’s authority, observed the proceedings from an earthen mound outside the circle. Still thinking he was in a dream, the confused old soldier went before the inspector of executions to ask for instructions. But another soldier dragged him away, saying, “Get them on the first chop, old fellow, one each. Come on, hurry up!”

He went over to the criminals. Two swishes, and two heads fell on the ground. Seeing the blood spurt out made him think that this dream would soon be over, but force of habit reminded him of the tradition from thirty years before. Without so much as a look backward, he picked up his heels and ran. When he reached the temple of the city god, a group of women was praying there, and the priest
was noisily shaking bamboo divination sticks out of a tube. Heedless of all this, the old soldier prostrated himself on the floor the moment he entered, kowtowing and crawling under the altar. When the temple crowd saw this man with his bloody sword, they thought he must be a murderer or a lunatic who had just killed his wife. Scared out of their wits, they ran outdoors to warn the neighborhood.

Soon the party from the execution ground arrived and was beset by people anxious to give them all their different versions of the event at the temple. Everyone agreed that it was the old codger who guarded the North Gate, that he had killed someone, and also that he was certifiably crazy. Like most of the elders of the town, the old priest from Yang Jinbiao’s youth was already deceased. Nobody paid any attention to the old custom; nobody even knew it had ever existed.

Having established that the man was crazy and holding a murder weapon and that anyone who entered the temple risked being cut down himself, the crowd immediately latched the door from the outside to think up a plan for capturing the madman.

Hiding under the altar, the old soldier heard all the hubbub outside but could not imagine the reason for it. When after a long wait the magistrate still had not come, he became very anxious, not knowing whether to go out or to stay in place.

More time passed. He could hear people outside the temple pulling the bolts on their rifles and loading the magazines with bullets. Then he heard a very familiar woman’s voice: “Don’t go in, don’t go in. He has a sword!” Next came the voice of the adjutant: “Don’t be afraid, we have guns! As soon as you see the lunatic, open fire and shoot to kill!”

The old soldier was frenzied and bewildered, without a clue about what to do. He kept thinking, in his befuddlement, “This is truly a terrible dream!”

Then someone opened the door to the temple and
shouted, still without entering. He pulled the bolt on his rifle, as if about to fire. Yang could also hear, very clearly, voices of people he knew. Among them was that of a leather worker.

He heard the adjutant speak again: “Enter! Shoot the madman!”

Frantic, the old soldier shouted out, “Hear me, hear me, Your Eminence the City God, what’s going on?” The people outside were making such a commotion that they seemed not to hear this.

Although the soldiers outside the door were in an uproar, each had only one life to give, so nobody dared to be the first to rush into the temple.

Suddenly an unidentified voice from the crowd bellowed out, angrily, “Madman, throw out your sword, or we’ll commence firing!”

“If this dream goes on, it will be just too horrible,” thought the old soldier. He did not want to be killed by a burst of gunfire in a dream. He simply couldn’t stand it any longer. The sword clattered out on the edge of the steps. At the risk of his life, a soldier rushed forward and picked it up. Witnessing the murder weapon in custody, and fearing no longer that they were in jeopardy, the throng surged forth into the temple.

The old soldier was seized. In the confusion, he was given a sound thrashing, then thoroughly trussed up, hog-tied, and secured to a pillar of the stoa. He saw himself surrounded by hundreds of people, yet still he could not understand what he’d done wrong, why they took him for a lunatic, or what would be the upshot. All this proved that it was not a dream. So the execution a little while before must have been real after all. Could it be that no one had been killed here for so many years that he really was crazy? Doubts swirled about in his mind, and in the end he could not get a handle on it. Someone came up behind him
unawares and overturned a bucket of filthy water over his head. He was drenched from head to foot; everyone broke out into uproarious laughter. Shocked and angry, the old soldier turned to look. So his tormentor was Cripple Wang, the town’s stinky-bean-curd peddler. He was grinning at his foul deed, as if proud of himself. Furious, the old soldier cursed him roundly: “Fifth Wang, you dog-fucked bastard, so even you’ve decided to take advantage of me – me, your old forebear!”

That sent everybody into rollicking laughter again. Hearing him speak, the adjutant opined that the madman had been shocked into sobriety by the slop and was no longer befuddled. He felt safe to draw near and ask why, after the execution, he had run so insanely into the city god’s temple. Had he seen a ghost, perhaps? Or run into some evil miasma?

“Why did I do it? Don’t you know the custom? You made me handle the case, and afterward I followed tradition by turning myself in. But the lot of you surrounded me, wanted to shoot me. I came close to dying in a hail of bullets! You’ve done fine, really fine. You took me for a madman! You’re a pack of ghosts. What other ghosts are there besides you? I ask you!”

So the local military who thought up this new gambit had put to death two Communists, not by firing squad, but by an extraordinary measure: they had asked the old executioner who guarded the city gate to cut off their heads, that they might be exposed in public as a warning to others. But the old soldier could not understand why the yamen wanted him to kill those two young people. The beheaded were none other than the two teachers from the primary school inside the North Gate.

Before their replacements had arrived, the office of keeper of the keys to the North Gate fell vacant, for the old soldier
had died. From that time forward everyone in town – soldiers, citizens, everyone – knew the joke about “the last executioner.” Moreover, it was said that the fellow in his befuddlement had been scared to death in broad daylight by a ghost.