

# Propitious

by Shen Congwen

translated by Philip F. Williams

## Translator's Introduction

Shen Congwen's 沈從文 *Fusheng* 福生 [Propitious] is one of his earliest well-regarded stories, having come out in 1925 less than a year after his first story was published.<sup>1</sup> The narrative is a wry portrayal of a youngster's happy rambles and stultifying provincial schooling in West Hunan. The elementary schoolboy protagonist's auspicious name, Propitious, stands in stark contrast with his sad lot as an unwilling student at this poorly run school.

Propitious and the other intimidated students are allowed to do little in class but recite lines that they have tried to memorize from Confucian classics—and suffer a scolding or even a whack on the head if they have forgotten part of an assigned passage. Yet the schoolmaster is not some villain from a melodrama of good versus evil, but rather a banal authority figure whose punishments tend to be less severe than his shrill threats, and who seems to be treating the schoolchildren with no more harshness than he himself had formerly experienced as a student. The underlying problem is rather a time-honored approach to education that often dulls children's natural curiosity about the world around them rather than gently channeling it in a constructive direction. Exhausted and humiliated by punishment and after-school detention, Propitious dejectedly hurries home at dusk with his head lowered instead of eagerly taking in the sights,

sounds, and smells along the town's streets, as is his natural bent.<sup>2</sup>

The irony in the very name of the protagonist extends to the central conflict in the classroom—Propitius's inability to recite the assigned passages from the classic vignette about an exemplar of child rearing, Mencius's mother 孟母. Nearly the exact opposite of a nurturing figure like Mencius's mother, the stern schoolmaster in front of class browbeats his hesitant students to the point where they daydream constantly about life outside of the school. The ironic tension between the rote recitation of passages reflecting Confucian educational ideals and the gritty reality of an unimaginative and ill-tempered teacher presages the protagonist Propertius's abrupt shifts between reverie about pleasant diversions on the streets and fields outside and a trembling awareness of grim confinement in the classroom.<sup>3</sup>

As in Shen Congwen's later autobiography, "Propitius" contrasts the combination of fear and boredom in a traditional-style Chinese elementary classroom with the educative value of close and rapt observation of the child's social and natural environment. If "what thou lovest well remains," then the bloom of natural curiosity about one's ordinary surroundings remains active in Propitius's memory, while the histrionics of an impatient and bookish pedagogue soon fade from the schoolboy's recollections.

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Yep, when it came around to the youngest kid Propitious's turn to recite the lesson from memory, everybody got a charge out of it!

Though the headmaster's wife had already lit the fire for that evening in the kitchen stove, the sun had just now crawled to a standstill at the top of the wooden screen in the courtyard, where its rays were gleaming with a yellowish hue. All this was proof that no matter what, they'd still have over a couple of hours of daylight left, plenty for Nuonuo and the rest of them to play for awhile.

"Uhhh . . . uhhh . . . L-l-l-long ago—long ago . . . ."

"Long ago, Mencius—" prompted the headmaster.

"Long ago, Mencius . . . uhhh . . . Long ago, Mencius . . . uhhh . . ."

"Long ago, Mencius's mother!" The headmaster gave Propitious's ear a vigorous tweak, showing the kind of indignation that was to be expected in light of the way he usually reacted to those children who couldn't memorize their lessons.

Naturally, the headmaster wouldn't get into the mood of yearning for class to be dismissed with as much forthrightness or enthusiasm as his students would show. Nonetheless, he also seemed to have gotten a little anxious himself, because even before the class had started their second recitation from memory, his wife had come into his study to ask him for some stove kindling.

"Long ago, Mencius's mother selected . . . uhhhhh . . . selected a neighbor . . . ."

“Selected a neighborhood!” This shout thundered in such a severe tone—especially the final syllable “hood”—that a couple of children on the verge of tucking their bookbags underarm and leaving this prison were startled back onto their benches, where their rear ends now seemed firmly glued!

Everybody was gazing in terror at that hand of the headmaster’s—the left hand whose fourth and fifth fingers sported two-inch long grey nails. By this time, the hand had already made contact with one of Propitious’s ears, so the young fellow’s head naturally tilted to one side. His knees were shaking, too, but not a single person noticed.

“You idiot! All the time in the world, and you can’t even recite four lines, can you?” The headmaster’s upper teeth were clamped on his lower lip, so everybody realized how furious he’d gotten. As to exactly why the headmaster was so furious at pupils of such a tender age—none of them seemed capable of figuring that one out. Perhaps it was due to the headmaster’s overabundance of enthusiasm for his students! If not, why was he always so short-tempered that his face would flush scarlet whenever a pupil stumbled a few times through a recitation?

“Just look at how Yunyun’s only a bit older than you, but he could still recite so much in a single day! When it’s your turn, even with a four-line passage so easy to memorize as this, you mumble on and on, but can’t even recite one line right! But as far as quarreling goes, you— . . . Hmmmph! Everybody keep seated, straight up and proper! So you’re already anxious for class to be let out, are you?— . . . As I was saying, when it comes to quarreling, you’re the first to jump in; the only thing I hear you doing all day is chattering away like the non-stop tweeting of a mountain sparrow—it’s only when you start studying that you hem and haw something terrible!” The only thing Propitious could hear was a buzzing in his ears, but from the modulations of the headmaster’s voice it was clear that he was getting a dressing down.

The headmaster’s hand had returned to its normal position beside his mouth, where it was stroking the wispy assemblage of several

brownish whiskers. Propitious's head had remained cocked to one side for quite some time, and his face had already flushed scarlet. If the headmaster were really to forget how fatigued his hand had become and go on with tweaking Propitious's ear, the tears in the young fellow's left eye would flow into his right eye, where it would merge with what had already welled up in that eye and flow onto his right cheek—there's no need to go into further detail. Although the headmaster's hand had temporarily withdrawn from Propitious's ear, how could this scamp who couldn't recite even one line of his lessons get off so easily, with only one bout of ear tweaking as his punishment? Since when could life be such a breeze? If all there was to it was one bout of ear tweaking, none of us would bother to study, we'd just let the headmaster tweak each kid's ear once a day and be done with it! According to our past experience in these matters, before the balance of Propitious's punishment were to come down on him, he'd get so scared that his hot tears would all dribble down from his eyes. What's more, several students who'd packed all their things in their bookbags and made ready to leave thought it funny when noticing how Propitious's manhandled ear had already turned a purplish red. But as soon as their eyes met the headmaster's solemn stare, which left an icy chill on any object it grazed, the dimpled smiles that had formed on everyone's faces were suddenly dispelled so fast that nobody knew where they had gone. Everyone was terrified into silence.

Even though everybody was struck dumb with terror, after an exchange of glances with whomever was sitting close by, the gaze of one and all happened to come to rest on those two long and curious fingernails that were scratching away listlessly at the headmaster's face. The value of those fingernails could be understood from the way the headmaster had carefully protected them. However, on that day awhile back when we heard the headmaster discourse on the good features of long fingernails, we also learned that aside from looking handsome and giving a fellow a refined air, pulverized fingernail clippings could fortify you against a hundred illnesses, and surpassed even Korean and overseas ginseng as a tonic.

“You're forbidden to go home for dinner today!”

Everybody's thoughts had all along been hanging on this thing. Now that this death sentence had been solemnly pronounced by the headmaster in words still ringing with indignation, it seemed as if each student suddenly felt that this thing had fallen upon him. However, right on its heels appeared a second anxiety: nobody was sure whether the headmaster's injunction against dinner meant that Propitious would have to stay here by himself, or that it would be the same as that time Guilin had been punished—he'd had to kneel before the image of Confucius and recite his lessons while everybody else was required to stay seated beside him, and it wasn't until he'd gotten all the lessons down cold that the whole class was finally dismissed as a group. There was no way of telling whether this latest news was good or bad until the headmaster's second order was proclaimed.

If their luck took a bad turn and the implied meaning of the first order was that the method of punishment used on Guilin would apply this afternoon as well, this scenario would influence the pleasures of after-school play for several other students; how indescribably severe! Consequently, at the moment that everybody's thoughts reached this juncture, all began to feel a bit of hatred for Propitious, that fellow who since "L-l-l-long ago" couldn't even memorize the line, "Long ago, Mencius's mother."

"Song Xiangjun!" barked the headmaster.

When Yunyun [Song's nickname] heard the headmaster call out his name, he hurriedly tucked his bookbag under his arm and walked over to Confucius's memorial tablet, where he bent his waist in a respectful bow. He turned around to bow in a similar way to the headmaster, and then walked out of the study.

"Zhou Simao!" A moment after Yunyun made his exit, the headmaster called out the second name.

The tall and lanky Zhou Mangzi had gotten up from his seat even before the last syllable in his name had rolled off the headmaster's lips. He also bowed twice as the previous schoolboy had done, and it seemed that there was nothing special about the way he bowed, but in truth a certain haughtiness came across as he stole a glance at Propitious, who was still standing there by the table with his head

lowered.

In this fashion, the headmaster dismissed the rest of the class one by one. His rationale was that if instead of dismissing them one by one, he were to let the whole lot out at once, then due to the friction that had grown between them during altercations they'd had in class, as soon as they walked out of the front gate they'd pick a quarrel and start fighting. By handling the situation this way, he'd be encouraging them in two things at once. Not only would he prevent fights from breaking out between them on the street; this method of his would also make them learn what it is to exert themselves at studying, for they'd vie with one another to finish memorizing their lessons early, so as to be the first one to get out of class. In actuality, this gang of unruly children had long since agreed to sit down and wait outside until all their classmates had assembled, at which point they would head out as a group to go play at the riverbank outside of the town's northern gate. Even if fights broke out, they'd still keep waiting for one another in accordance with the plan. Hadn't the headmaster simply been dreaming to have thought it would be otherwise?

Aside from making bows to Confucius and the headmaster, each of them darted a glance with small but cunning eyes at the ramrod straight but quaking figure of Propitious there by the table. Propitious didn't need to raise up his drooping head to notice this. From looking sideways through tearful and blurred eyes, poor Propitious saw each pair of feet take each student up and over the threshold as they left the headmaster's study—he felt as though they were all taking away a part of his own mind or body each time. It was only after the headmaster completed his roll call and started puffing on the waterpipe that Propitious finally awoke with a start to the clear realization that he himself was still whole and intact—and that there was nothing more than this intact body of his left in that cold and frightening study.

The headmaster had just gotten through leading Propitious through another recitation of that passage from the Three-character Classic, "Long ago, Mencius's mother selected a neighborhood; when her son didn't study, she cut her fabric from her loom." Now seated at the table and alone, Propitious dutifully set to his assigned task, recit-

ing these lines over and over again, though with many an “uhhh” and “hmmmm” sandwiched in. The more he went on with his recitation, the more the study’s walls and ceiling seemed to recede to the distance, leaving him far behind.

. . . How delighted Zhou Mangzi must be feeling right about now! He must have rolled up his trouser cuffs, and be wading through the crystal-clear, shin-deep river shallows to ferret out and catch crabs! Those crabs are even smaller than coins, and turn reddish after they die . . . Yunyun must be digging around in the sand and molding mud cannonballs with Nuonuo and the others, or else picking up pottery shards and skipping them over the river’s surface—it was hard to say for sure.

If they were going for a dip in the river, that’d really be fun! “Come over here, Mangzi, I’m gonna dive in!” Before you knew what had happened, Zhaoxiang would have bent forward at the waist and disappeared into the water, all right! From somewhere else along the bank, Zhaoxiang’s head would suddenly pop out above the water surface, and then he’d swim back over again, kerplunk, kerplunk, kerplunk!

While each person was having fun of this sort on the river, some crusty fellow, I don’t know who, would get up to pulling off a joke: he’d shout, “Guisheng (or maybe Mangzi), your mother’s come from home to look for you.” Guigui would be lolling about in the water at this moment, and in panic would hurriedly submerge himself so completely that only his face would show above the surface, thereby preventing his mother up on the bank from recognizing him.

“Where’s my Guigui?” a voice would ask.

“Ma’am, he’s not here—he headed back for home a long time ago,” another voice would answer. In such a way would Guigui’s mother get fooled by another child’s lies! As for Guigui, he’d once again be happily swimming back and forth. And if Guigui’s mother hadn’t actually shown up, the crusty fellow would have to get a splashing from Guigui before the matter was settled. Now, if this led to the crusty fellow calling out, “The headmaster’s come!”, then one or two boys would throw themselves into the water, and soon the only

sight left within view would be seven or eight faces pointing skyward, much like several melons bobbing up and down on the surface of the water. The upshot of this would have to be somebody assuring all the others that the whole thing had been a joke, and only then would there be a return to the state of normalcy prior to the alarm, along with a spate of uproarious laughter . . . .

“Recite it! Recite it! If you don’t get it memorized, I won’t let you go back home today!” Resounding in Propitious’s ears like a clap of thunder, the headmaster’s voice finally called Propitious back from those trance-like recollections of times he’d gone swimming. The monotonous sound of lesson recitation, at first hurried and gradually more doddering, once again drifted from within the study to beyond the compound walls outside.

As to whether or not these tender sounds of recitation, bearing a hint of occasional sobbing, could actually arouse the attention of everyone who was then passing by outside the compound wall, no one knew. Yet I believe that no matter how you sized it up, the “tock-tock” sound of the buckwheat noodle-seller beating his wooden clappers outside the front gate was more tuneful by far.

By the time Propitious had made his pair of bows to Confucius and the headmaster, he raised his head and saw that the sun had already crawled from on top of the wooden screen to the outer tips of the pomelo tree. Though his ears didn’t care to take in the headmaster’s garrulous admonitions, the sounds from the kitchen of cabbage dropping into a wok and sizzling in hot oil reached him loud and clear. The sound of sautéing vegetables reminded him of how empty his stomach was, and of his desire to eat a dish of rice soaked in red amaranth soup.

Once he had crossed the threshold, perhaps because of how red and swollen his eyes had become, the Propitious who usually couldn’t resist stopping for awhile to gawk at a dogfight now just walked on with a determined stride, even though he clearly saw a number of children had gathered round to chat and laugh with the red-kerchiefed Daibao, who was turning somersaults and standing on his head. Propitious didn’t want to slow down a bit, not even to listen to those curi-

ous tunes Daibao was humming that could make a fellow shake with laughter! Right on the road in front of the railing, someone had put a tankful of live yellow eels, which were crowded together and wriggling around inside—what a fascinating thing this was, too! Nevertheless, he stiffened his resolve and didn't even give it a second glance.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Propitious” was first published in *Yu si* 語絲 (Threads of Talk) 33 (June 1925) 275-78, and is among the first twenty stories that Shen Congwen (1902-1988) published. The edition used in this translation is *Shen Congwen xiaoshuo xuan* 沈從文小說選 (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1982) 6-11.

<sup>2</sup> David Der-wei Wang characterizes Shen Congwen's variety of realist writing as contrived or “imaginary nostalgia” and “the imagination of loss,” yet the concluding loss of Propitious's sense of wonder and curiosity about his surroundings seems quite palpable, and far from contrived. See Wang's *Fictional Realism in 20th-century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992) 253.

<sup>3</sup> The role of reverie in the lives of Shen's West Hunanese country folk is described in Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987) 171.