

SHORT STORY

Shi Zhecun (1905-), literary editor, short story writer and scholar, forgotten for more than three decades, has in the last few years been 'rediscovered'. Less well known than many of his contemporaries, he had, after the 'revaluation' of modern Chinese literature which followed the end of the Cultural Revolution, regained some standing in the history of pre-liberation literature.

An early member of the Communist Youth League, he later found himself at odds with the policies of the League of Left-Wing writers. While remaining firmly leftwing in his political thinking, he wanted to pursue a more independent line in his writing. Because of this, he and his associates, the poet Dai Wangshu and another famous man of letters, Du Heng, came into conflict with the Communist Party literary establishment.

Much of the controversy took place in the pages of the Shanghai literary magazine founded by Shi himself, *Xiandai* or *Les Contemporains*. This was a most influential magazine during the 1930s when it provided a forum for left-wing writers at a time when more blatantly leftist magazines had been silenced by the Guomintang.

His detractors accused him of not pursuing socialist realism. Shi countered that it was his own desire for realism which led him to describe life as he knew it: the life of the petite-bourgeoisie in the towns and countryside. In this he succeeds to a greater extent than many left-wing writers attempting to portray the life of the proletariat of which they often knew little.

Seagulls, here translated, is typical of Shi's brand of realism. The story of Xiao Lu, an alienated bank clerk forced to abandon his village home for the highly westernized metropolis of Shanghai in order to support his family, gives an interesting glimpse of the antagonism between town and country in China in the 1930s; it is the story of an individual flung into an urban existence with which he has no affinity.

SEAGULLS

The overcast skies and low pressure which had been building up over Shanghai over the last ten days had suddenly disappeared.

The half-warm, half-cold autumn sun shone miraculously right onto the half blacked-out window in front of Xiao Lu's desk.

Xiao Lu was a bank clerk who had begun as an apprentice. Three months ago, he had stood alone next to the desk beside the window, with his very own desk lamp, call bell, glass inkstand and the thick ledger they had given him. This had made him feel very happy. Sitting in his swivel chair he had felt that his promotion was fully established.

Now he no longer felt such contentment. He had tried to look into the future: three, five, seven years hence. A detestable panorama unfolded before his eyes: the flowery pattern of the lamp-shade covered with a layer of engrained dirt, the call bell producing a tired, recalcitrant ring after being pressed only two or three times, and a thick full ledger and a new one appearing, as if he would never be able to fill them all up, and he was still mechanically sitting there from nine in the morning till four in the afternoon.

Twenty-three year old Xiao Lu sighed as he gazed over

the pure white ledger pages before him. Not far from where he was sitting his colleague on fixed-term deposits was writing up accounts with one hand and holding half a banana in the other, simultaneously chewing and singing his favourite tune: *Yes we have no bananas*.

The apprentice who dealt with deposits was talking to a customer through the grill:

'Hey, aren't you from the tea-shop? Why don't you bring some over?'

'Okay! Tomorrow. Black or green?'

'Black, Jimen, Puer, anything'll do.'

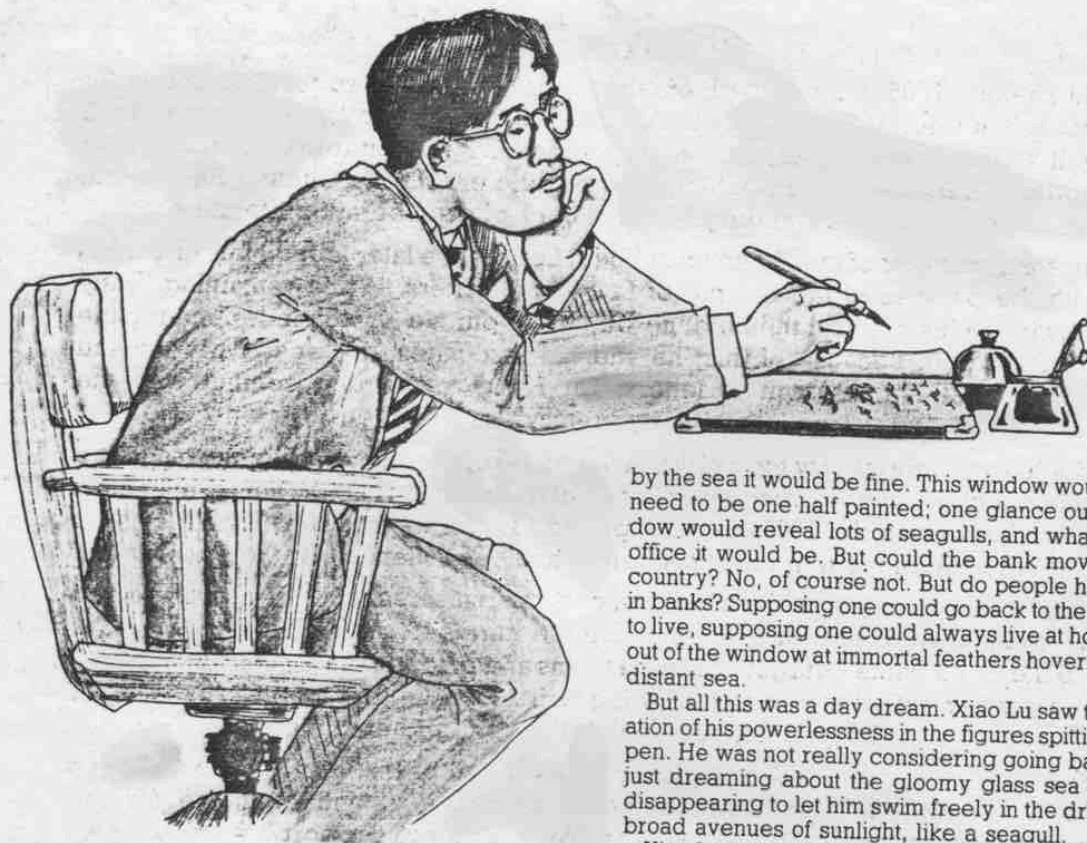
Fatty from Wuchang on current accounts was dealing with a cheque while saying to his colleague on remittances behind him:

'Hey, A Wang, see you've got a flower in your button-hole again!'

A Wang on remittances smiled.

'Every Monday a flower in his lapel, you can bet on it!' said Fatty nodding.

Everyone within earshot turned around to look at A Wang and smiled. Xiao Lu smiled too, although he didn't feel like smiling. He was still writing numerous combinations of figures in his ledger. Pure white paper, red lines, dark



blue figures and punctuation marks endlessly spat out from his pen...0123456789 figures, figures, figures, limitless, inexhaustible \$\$\$\$\$!

It was now three in the afternoon. It was the first day that the sunlight had shone through the unpainted top half of the window; the figures in his big ledger were lit in the sunlight. He thought that the air was a lot drier and crisper than it had been a few days previously...Damp, murky figures on damp, murky paper, even the spirit got that way. The tranquil rays of the sun suddenly quivered...

He couldn't help looking up from his ledger. Through the window he saw the white hats of a group of three or four nuns who were just going past. He imagined the lacquered half of his window as a dark blue sea and this bunch of white hats as seagulls flapping their wings and wheeling around. A flock of white feathered seagulls, thought Xiao Lu, who have flown over a vast expansive sea.

For two years now Xiao Lu had not been home. The village, the sea below it, the girl who had stood with him at dusk beside the sea staring at the white gulls flapping their wings, for an instant it had all come flooding back to him. It made Xiao Lu, bank clerk, leant over his ledgers, extremely homesick. Those seagulls were often about. In the early morning just as the mist was breaking up, as you walked along the harbour path, if you coughed you would startle a flock of silver wings into flight. And at dusk in the purple haze you could see dancing white feathers on the distant sea. Who, sitting in his village hut, could resist the temptation of getting up to catch a glimpse of those birds of the sea?

But now Xiao Lu was sitting stiffly in the largest bank in the most bustling district of Shanghai, dreaming of seagulls. If only the bank could move to the countryside

by the sea it would be fine. This window would not even need to be one half painted; one glance out of the window would reveal lots of seagulls, and what a pleasant office it would be. But could the bank move out to the country? No, of course not. But do people have to work in banks? Supposing one could go back to the countryside to live, supposing one could always live at home, staring out of the window at immortal feathers hovering over the distant sea.

But all this was a day dream. Xiao Lu saw the confirmation of his powerlessness in the figures spitting out of his pen. He was not really considering going back, he was just dreaming about the gloomy glass sea before him disappearing to let him swim freely in the drifting wavy, broad avenues of sunlight, like a seagull.

Xiao Lu finished reckoning up his accounts, closed up the thick ledger and continued with his thoughts. Seagulls flickered in his mind, conjuring up a silvery-flamed brilliance.

Inattentively he flipped over the hard stiff ledger cover and on its blue lining casually drew the seagulls he was contemplating. He was happy with his ink drawings, he had not had a chance to do any since leaving school. He counted up and admired the seagulls in their various attitudes. Altogether there were forty of them.

Forty. Why forty? Xiao Lu glimpsed at the calendar to his right—the 31st. The thin black figures jumped off the page—the end of the month, today was pay-day. Forty dollars. Today was the third time he'd collected his forty dollar salary.

At the end of the day Xiao Lu, following the crowd of his colleagues, left the bank by the side entrance. He straightened his tie, walked down the road and round past the window in front of his desk. Craning his neck, he peeped in at his desk and felt a sudden, strange pang of sorrow, like a wandering spirit staring at his own rotting corpse.

Xiao Lu continued on down the road. As a rule, on leaving the bank at four o'clock Xiao Lu would walk back to his lodgings in order to save the bus fare. But today he did not follow his normal routine. He had already decided to seek out some fitting entertainment in this bustling metropolis, as a light-spirited seagull would seek out a fish on the vast waves.

But where to go and what to do? He began to regret not having asked a couple of his colleagues to go with him. A few of them got together at a bar every Saturday, some went to see a film together, and a few of the trainees went shooting in the park every Sunday. Yet there were also those colleagues who spent their spare time in lone



pursuits. For instance people said they often saw the head of Domestic Remittances going to the cinema by himself, and then there was A Wang, a very mysterious person, they said. He was friendly with a girl who sold flowers in Suzhou, so he took the night train every Saturday and on Mondays on his return he always wore a flower in his lapel.

Picturing that poised knowing smile of A Wang's, Xiao Lu couldn't help wondering. He tried hard to imagine what the flower girl looked like, but he couldn't quite conjure her up. There was only one girl whose image he could pull out of his mind, his one and only girlfriend, his childhood playmate, his first love, to this day his secret sweetheart who still subconsciously ensnared him. She was his neighbour back in the countryside, the precious daughter of Old Wu who ran the general store.

Thinking of those childhood days, days when he did not bear the responsibility of providing for the livelihood of a whole household, he recalled how every day he would go exploring with her, catching finches in the forest, searching for clams on the sandy seashore, staying out till dusk: such happiness was obviously gone for good. When he had returned home the year before, he had not seen her; he only heard that she had gone off with Old Wu when he had moved his shop to Changmen Road in Suzhou, and was helping the old man run the business.

Xiao Lu strolled along while recalling these memories. He glimpsed a girl standing in a tobacconist's and he couldn't help wishing: if only Old Wu were to have moved his shop to Shanghai everything would have been fine.

But although Old Wu had not opened up shop in Shanghai, his daughter lingered in his thoughts. By now Xiao Lu had already walked the length of Tibet Street and was surprised by his own swiftness. He was already under the glass awning of the Great Brilliance Theatre.

The Great Brilliance Theatre, sumptuous, modern construction, top class pleasure ground, gallery of pictures in motion; among the crowds of men and women, Xiao Lu felt himself dull and insignificant because he had not yet been in to see a film there. He looked attentively at the advertisement for the film, underneath the two bold black English words: *NOW SHOWING*; he was completely subdued. He walked towards the box office window. He was just over half-way there, he still had not quite got up to the window, when he saw someone in his path, a woman. Under the completely modern Shanghainese woman's clothing and make-up, he realized in a flash just who it was.

Old Wu's daughter, his childhood sweetheart! How did she come to be here? How could she be dressed like



Shi Zhecun, Shanghai, 1982.

PHOTO: GREGORY LEE

that? What was she doing standing there, as if she were waiting for someone? Who was she waiting for? Could he be mistaken? No, impossible, there was a black birthmark on her left arm. Wasn't it unmistakably clear just above the platinum watchstrap?

Xiao Lu was thrown into confusion by all these puzzling doubts. He did not dare to approach her and in fact stepped back a little, to avoid her gaze. He hid himself in the crowd and like a big mastiff fixed his gaze on his prey.

She did not realize that someone was spying on her. She was staring towards the main entrance. After a while her tiny lips moved a little, then a man appeared and came up to her side. From the back and side Xiao Lu immediately recognized the man. It was the man with a flower in his lapel, A Wang.

Holding hands they walked up to the box office window. Xiao Lu softly exhaled and walked gingerly out of the theatre. A newspaper boy brandished the evening papers in front of his eyes. He felt hatred rise up inside him.

Yes, that lone seagull had already danced in the sunlight and dusk of the metropolis, perhaps all the seagulls had come. Perhaps in the countryside on the vast sea, there were no longer enough seagulls to fly off together.

Xiao Lu, junior bank clerk, felt a twinge of nihilism within himself.

Introduced and translated by Gregory Lee, who is completing his doctoral thesis on Chinese literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies (London).