



Chatting about Fairy Tales: Excerpts from a Conversation with Xi Xi

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Featured Author
Newman Prize Laureate Xi Xi



Chatting about Fairy Tales

Excerpts from a Conversation with
Xi Xi

Ho Fuk Yan

Translated by Tammy Lai-Ming Ho

This conversation between renowned literary critic Ho Fuk Yan and Xi Xi, one of Hong Kong's most beloved and acclaimed authors, took place over the course of several meetings during the spring of 1982 in Hong Kong. They discuss Xi Xi's views on reading, writing, and other matters, including her preference for comedies over tragedies, her appreciation of the work of Latin American authors and Italo Calvino, and her fondness for fairy tales and children's literature. She also discusses some of her early stories, including "Glass Slippers," "The Bowl," and "The Frying Pan." Although this conversation occurred more than three decades ago, it serves as an invaluable resource to contemporary readers for better understanding Xi Xi's early writings and her thoughts on literature, as well as her observations on pre-handover Hong Kong.



Photo by Ho Fuk Yan.

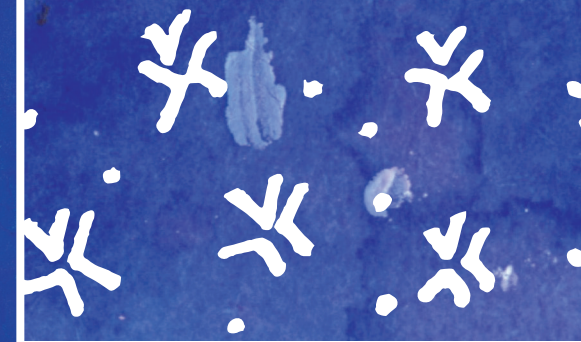
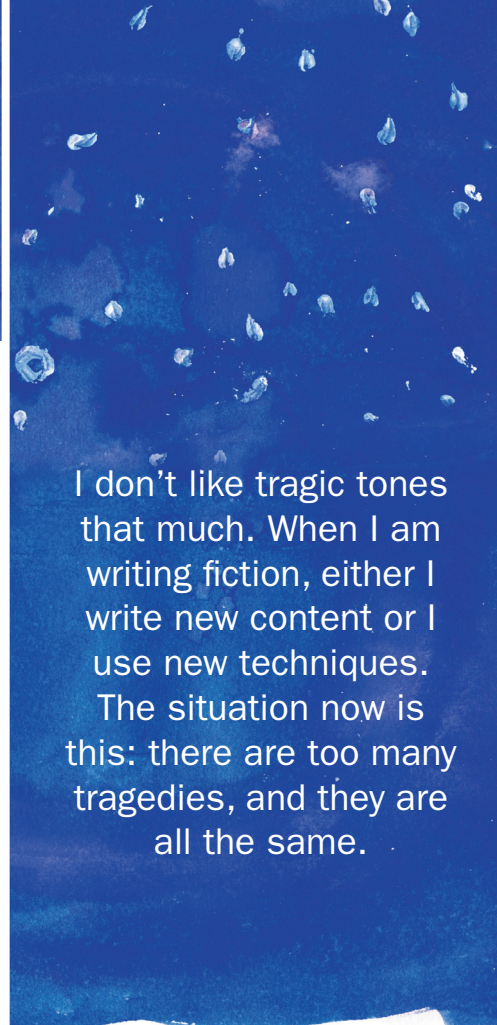
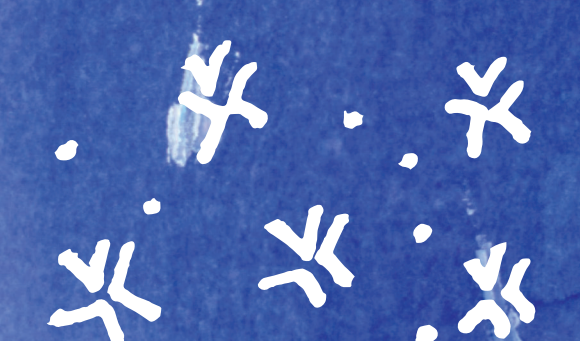
Introduction

This is a series of conversations on literature, ranging from Xi Xi's own fiction and poetry, to a discussion of reading and writing in general, and her views on this and that. Because I felt that our exchange was rather interesting, I picked up my pen to write down what Xi Xi had to say about her writings, as well as some other topics. The interview, therefore, may be useful for readers to understand Xi Xi's works. It may have reference value too; when Xi Xi talked about other people's fiction and poetry, she adopted the perspective of a fictionist and poet.

Sometimes it was a dialogue, although I did not say much; sometimes it was like her monologue, and I was merely listening. Because the conversation was very long

(it started in March 1982), continuing on and off, and the topics covered were quite broad, I ended up writing, reading, and thinking at the same time. Inevitably there may be some inconsistencies, even contradictions. I tidied up things a bit and provided supplementary information. I am aiming for truthfulness, instead of completeness. Occasionally, we decided on a topic for conversation in advance, allowing us to prepare what to say. More often than not, our conversation was casual, uninhibited. You can consider these as random literary thoughts, expressed in a conversational manner.

Our conversation was originally published in the literary monthly *Plain Leaves* (*Suye wenxue* 素葉文學) in January 1983 and reprinted in Xi Xi's 1984 short story



collection *A Woman Like Me* (*Xiang wo zheyang de yige nüzi* 像我這樣的一個女子).

Ho Fuk Yan: Let's start with "Glass Slippers," which you wrote in 1980. In the story, there is this sentence: "Among us, no one believes that he or she will turn into a pumpkin at midnight." This makes me think of the recent trendy topic about the "deadline" of 1997. At the time you wrote "Glass Slippers," not many people were talking about 1997. I am afraid it was also not a topic commonly discussed in other literary works.

Xi Xi: I was thinking about this question. Hongkongers were very strange at that time. Society seemed to be very prosperous then, and people behaved as though they were not concerned about the city's future. Cinderella is a fictional character; how could she have a hometown? I merely appropriated the Brothers Grimm's story to tell a Hong Kong story.

HFY: The details in "Glass Slippers" are very concrete, reminding one of everyday life.

XX: When my narrator reaches Cinderella's old hometown, I write: "There were four little mice near the feet of the stool, which was the work of the country's famous potters, brothers Jacob and Wilhelm." The four little mice turn into wheels in Disney's *Cinderella*, and Jacob and Wilhelm are the names of the Brothers Grimm. "Glass Slippers" is a fictional story. I mainly want to write about Hongkongers through the glass slippers. Don't you think Hong Kong people have a stronger ability to adapt than Cinderella? But Hongkongers are not the real Cinderella, for none of us can be as fortunate as her, meeting a prince, and living a happily-ever-after life. There is no fairy tale in Hong Kong, no poetry. Our girls won't turn into pumpkins; they won't turn into anything. But like the girls in fairy tales, they all want to wear glass slippers, even if it means chopping off parts of their feet.

I don't like tragic tones that much. When I am writing fiction, either I write new content or I use new techniques. The situation now is this: there are too many tragedies, and they are all the same.

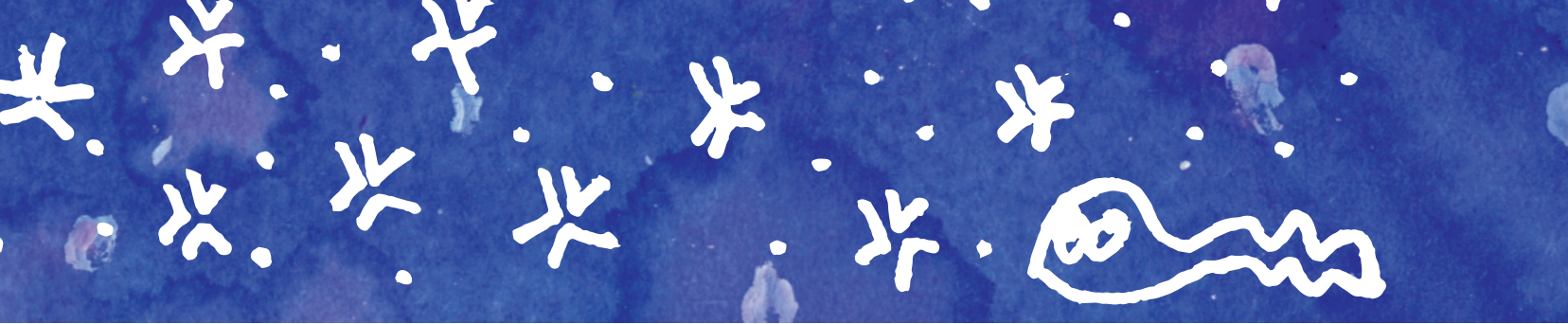
HFY: In your stories you have given some examples of Hongkongers' adaptability. For example, even though apartments have become smaller and the population in the city has increased, there's still a "can-do" attitude. Another example: Hong Kong's newspaper columnists are required to write a certain number of words, and they just do it. Some can even submit a certain number of poetry lines. Seventeen-and-a-half? No problem! Then I'll give you seventeen-and-a-half. All this is, of course, incredible. But there is also a problem: is a poem written in

such a manner still poetry? This adaptability, this ability to wear glass slippers, what's the meaning of all that? You use a happy tone to narrate the story, but the underlying principle is satire.

XX: I prefer comedic effects. I don't like tragic tones that much. When I am writing fiction, either I write new content or I use new techniques. The situation now is this: there are too many tragedies, and they are all the same. I want to write things that are more upbeat, which makes people think I am always writing light-hearted things. I was recently reading an interview with Gabriel García Márquez, in which he talks about writing a long happy love story, because happiness is not currently a trendy emotion. He wants to reactivate happiness. This is good news. And I happily look forward to reading this story.

HFY: Didn't Han Yu 韓愈 once say, "It is difficult to master the expression of pleasure but easy to express poverty and sadness?" There are so many examples in classical literature that use an upbeat context to write about tragedy.

XX: It's like that when I wrote "The Drawer." I used a light tone.



HFY: You wrote “The Drawer” in 1981. The story is about distance, alienation, and how the meaning of humanity is reduced to a drawer. Drawers are more important than people.

XX: This is a strange phenomenon in Hong Kong: you need to carry your ID with you when you go on the street; otherwise, you are out of luck. What does that mean? Well, ID cards are more important than people. If someone doesn’t have an identity card, then he or she is not believed to be a person. You go to buy shoes, and the shopkeeper asks you for a foot sample. It is not enough that you have your actual feet with you. Because they trust the foot samples, and not the feet.

HFY: In the end, feet are led by shoes. . . Let’s return to “Glass Slippers.” I think it’s a wonderful story.

XX: Many think it’s a travel writing piece.

HFY: Or a game.

XX: Some read it as a prose essay, because its structure is not immediately like fiction. Actually, what *is* fiction-like style?

HFY: I want to know too. What is *not* fiction-like style? Must fiction have characters with distinctive personalities? And must the tone be consistent? The works of some Latin American writers such as Mario Vargas Llosa use magic realism or structural realism. They use different approaches to depict reality.

XX: Can we say “Glass Slippers” is “fairy-tale realism?”

HFY: What were the fairy tales that you first read?

XX: “Snow White,” and some stories by Hans Christian Andersen. But it’s really the drawings in the fairy tales. I was first drawn to those drawings: you can see the tiny holes on Snow White’s lace sleeves. It’s like when I watched soccer matches with my father when I was younger, I only paid attention to the colors of the players’ socks.

HFY: You have written some notes on Andersen’s fairy tales.

XX: Indeed. I reread the stories recently. He wrote about 128 fairy tales, and I have read over one hundred. While the Brothers Grimm collected tales, Andersen wrote new stories, so they are more unique. But I doubt if many of Andersen’s stories are really meant for children, or are suitable for children to read. The endings of “Little Mermaid” and “The Little Match Girl” are so tragic. There are seldom happy endings in his stories. The one story that has a truly happy ending is “What the Old Man Does Is Always Right.” Stories such as “Snow White” and “Cinderella,” collected by Brothers Grimm, tend to have suffering female protagonists who are tortured by their stepmothers. Then they meet their princes, and their problems are seemingly resolved. We are told they lead happily-ever-after lives. But there’s little mention of the love between the prince and the princess. But Andersen’s works aren’t like this. Take, for example, “The Little Mermaid.” It’s clearly a love story, but can children understand that kind of love? It’s the same with “The Steadfast Tin Soldier”—it’s a story, but not a fairy tale. On the contrary, Oscar Wilde’s “The Happy Prince” is about love—love in a broad sense. It’s comparatively more suitable for children.

HFY: Speaking of Wilde’s “The Happy Prince” . . .

XX: I refer to “The Happy Prince” in *My City*. The protagonist is called Merry Mak.

HFY: “The Happy Prince” is the best fairy tale I have read. After the prince dies, he becomes a statue, and the story begins with his reflections. When he was alive, he lived happily in his palace. But the palace was encircled by walls, so he couldn’t see what life was really like in the outside world. His happiness was isolated, inauthentic. After his death, a tall statue is built in his honor, and he can now see people’s sufferings. He only truly lives once he feels compassion for them. He gives away all of the treasures from the statue to save the people. He becomes genuinely “happy.”

XX: This should be the true image of a prince. He is noble and loving. He doesn’t chase after his own riches. Princes in other stories are mostly nondescript, such as the ones in “Snow White” and “Cinderella,” or they are very cowardly.

HFY: There's also a prince who slashed a fire-spitting dragon to save a princess. How about Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*?

XX: That is the best contemporary fairy tale. There does not seem to be any princesses in *The Little Prince*. What Oscar Wilde and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry write have the most literary sensibilities. . . If I were to choose the top ten fairy tales, "The Happy Prince" might be number one, and the others would be "Cinderella," "Snow White" . . .

HFY: *The Little Prince*, "The Little Match Girl," "The Little Mermaid" . . .

XX: Andersen did write a lot.

HFY: Andersen was writing fairy tales primarily in the first half of the nineteenth century, while Wilde was writing in the second half, and he died in 1900. When Wilde published his fairy tales, Andersen must've already been an old man. Wilde's "The Devoted Friend" seems to be a retelling of an existing story. Anyway, what do you think of the Italian writer Italo Calvino? You have recently read his folktales.

XX: Calvino rewrites old stories that he collected. Most conventional fairy tales end with "The prince and the princess lived happily ever after." But Calvino keeps writing beyond this point, writing about their married life. Maybe this has something to do with the Italian tradition of *Decameron*. In Calvino's tales, popes and clergymen often appear. One of the stories is about choosing a new pope, and the selection process is quite bizarre: if a dove lingers on someone's head, then that person becomes the pope. Calvino's endings are quite special, and it's common for them to return to reality. He sometimes uses some poetry couplets to end the story, for example:

"They live their days happy and satisfied,
but we remain penniless."

All twelve brothers are crowned princes, but I
am as before—a poor commoner.

"The prince and the princess live happily ever after,
but I am still impoverished, and nobody cares about

me." You can see that the narrator suddenly shows up. Michel Butor comments on the structure of the fairy tale, saying that fairy tales on the one hand elevate children's imaginary worlds, and on the other hand remind them of the reality of society. I think Calvino succeeds in achieving this duality. Don't you think it's a bit like the defamiliarization effect in Brecht's plays?

HFY: Butor believes that people nowadays should invent new fairy tales for today's children.

XX: That's right. The society is different now. It's problematic to still think a marriage between royal families can resolve problems.

HFY: What, according to you, is the future of the fairy tale?

XX: From oral to textual, if the form is to continue to develop, I think the next stage will be visual.

HFY: The story "Apple," which you wrote recently, can be read as a fairy tale.

XX: That's one of the *Fertile Soil Town* stories I have always wanted to write. I give the Apple Award Grand Prize to a fairy tale, not a religious story, a myth, a folktale, or a scientist.


HFY: Let's talk about "The Bowl" and "The Frying Pan." Both stories are told through the protagonists' internal monologues.

XX: "The Bowl" was written before "The Frying Pan." The first one has two monologues, and the second has four.

HFY: "Family Diaries" also adopts the style of the monologue. There are altogether seven monologues. It's an even earlier work.

XX: The story was published in *The Chinese Student Weekly*. Each character narrates one section, and then I combined them. I included it in my collection *Jiaohe*, so as to memorialize it.

HFY: It's like a play.



XX: A lot of traditional Chinese plays are like this. The character who shows up first narrates a passage: I am so-and-so. I no longer remember now why I wrote like that, using a near-dramatic style. I have always wanted to borrow something from drama. In *My City*, for example, I have used the convention from Yuan drama of inserting stage directions like “so-and-so acts in such-and-such manner.” I think there’s still a lot more to explore. I like “The Bowl” more than “The Frying Pan.”

HFY: The writing in “The Bowl” is more elegant.

XX: It’s also more personal. “The Frying Pan” is a bit distant, and the scope is larger.

HFY: Was your writing of “The Frying Pan” inspired by any Western style?

XX: I didn’t write “The Frying Pan” immediately after “Family Diaries.” The two stories were separated by more than ten years. After “Family Diaries,” I wrote a piece titled “Roadside Society,” and it was also published in *The Chinese Student Weekly*. Paragraph after paragraph is narrated in news style. They have Reuters, I have Roadside Society. Every paragraph begins with “On a certain day, at a certain time,” and talks about a missing girl. There’s a lot of gossip about her, but actually nothing has happened to her. I can’t remember the details now. Afterward, I read Donald Barthelme’s story on Paul Klee, “Engineer-Private Paul Klee Misplaces an Aircraft between Milbertshofen and Cambrai, March 1916.” He cut Klee’s diaries and added a shadow character. I was also reading some Latin American drama. The play that left the most impression on me was Colombian playwright Enrique Buenaventura’s one-act play *The Schoolteacher* [*La Maestra*]. It’s about a female teacher whose

I think some Hong Kong critics are rather lazy and want to understand at first glance. They can’t see clearly, or they mistakenly assume that they are seeing clearly, and they make critiques—they even critique with strong authority.

father is a peasant mayor, and also the town’s founder. But he doesn’t understand politics and regime change, such as how the new regime would kill all of the leaders of the previous regime. The female teacher teaches children how to read and recognize words, teaches them about religion, and teaches them to love their country and the national flag. But none of this has any meaning. She ends up starving herself. She performs sitting on the front of the stage, and the others either stand behind her or appear in the periphery. She has no direct interaction with the other characters. She is already dead, but they are

still alive. She doesn’t look at them, nor do they look at her. There are only monologues, but the contents of these monologues echo one another. When writing “The Frying Pan,” at first, I wrote two monologues, and some people said they didn’t understand. I ended up writing a total of four, adding things like what the woman said, what the old man said. I think some Hong Kong critics are rather lazy and want to understand at first glance. They can’t see clearly, or they mistakenly assume that they are seeing clearly, and they make critiques—they even critique with strong authority.

HFY: Faulkner said: some critics are like American soldiers running around during the Second World War, just “dropping by for a visit.”

XX: I don’t write film reviews anymore, and it has something to do with that. I don’t want to critique without basis. Films develop so fast, like Godard, Bergman. They are so advanced, so avant-garde. If we only know a thing or two, how can we critique their films? Also, we haven’t watched these directors’ entire oeuvres. I believe in the “auteur theory”: it considers the author in conjunction with all of his or her works.

HFY: Viewers don't examine the intention of a piece of work, and they don't understand its place among the author's entire oeuvre.

XX: Some people think that examining the author's intention is the "intentional fallacy."

HFY: The author, reader, and work form a triangle. The New Critics only discuss the work, denying the author and reader the right to speak. The work doesn't speak, so who interprets the work? The critic is the only person who analyzes and evaluates it. However, this is the age of interdisciplinarity.

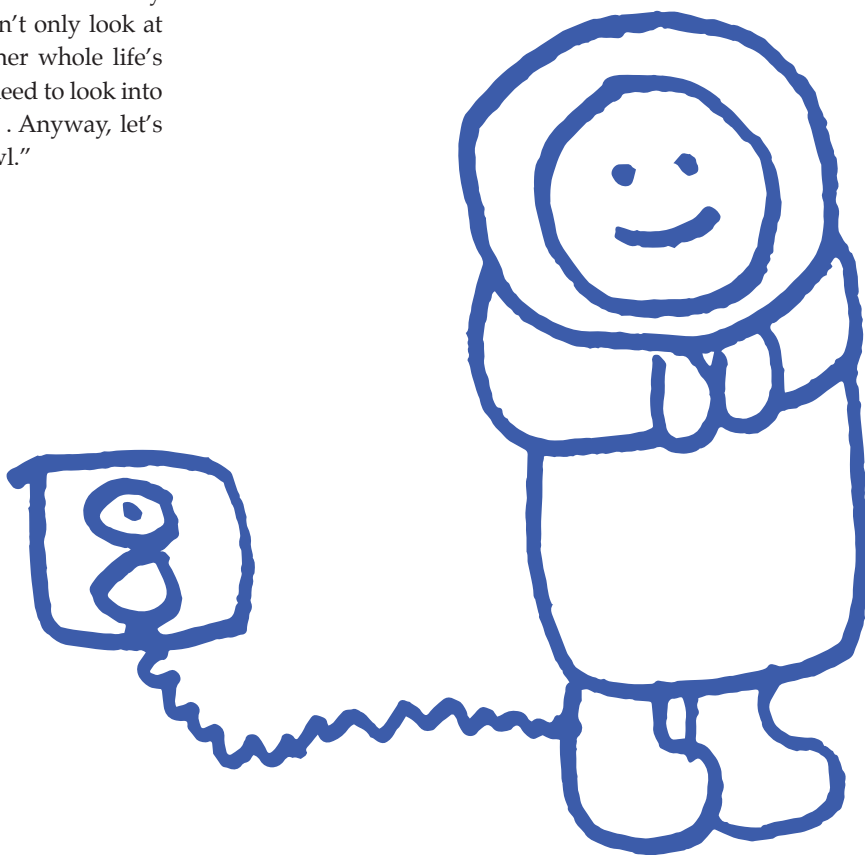
XX: Like Truffaut, Ozu—you can't just watch one or two of their films. You have to watch everything. Their works are interconnected with cause and effect. One film is the extension of a previous one. Reading Gabriel García Márquez is like this too. His novels are interlinked. The end of one novel is the beginning of the other, continuously developing. A minor character from one story becomes the main protagonist in another. To truly critique a person's body of work, you can't only look at one piece, you have to consider his or her whole life's creations, and at the same time, you also need to look into the works of his or her contemporaries. . . . Anyway, let's return to "The Frying Pan" and "The Bowl."

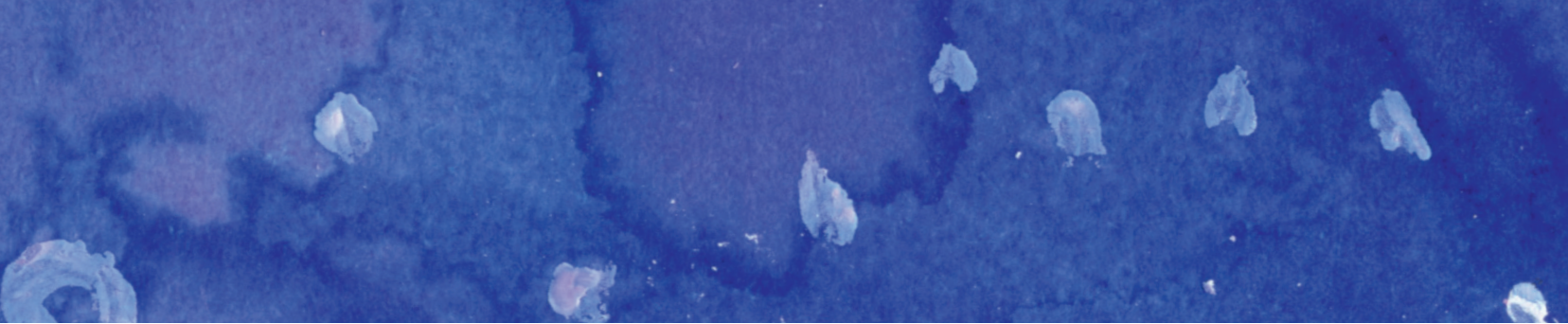
HFY: When I was reading these stories, I was wondering if the monologue structure you use is necessary, or if you are simply using this form for the sake of using it. My answer is: the structure does fit the contents of the stories. The two stories adopt the monologue style. But there are differences between these stories. The two female characters in "The Bowl" start at the same point: they study together, and even play soccer together, but their paths diverge. It's not only spatial distance. They intersect but do not communicate, so they tell their own stories, and their monologues alternately appear. They contrast one another, and there are contradictions

and conflicts—that's drama. This is what is traditionally called "speaking in two strands"—it's like in films there are parallel montages. You were talking about the Latin American play *The Schoolteacher*, and it reminds me of the Beijing opera *A Bolt of Cloth*. Huang Zuolin mentions this opera when he talks about Brecht's Chinese theatre experience. Reportedly, there is a scene that employs parallel montage. But I haven't seen the opera. As for "The Frying Pan," there are four monologues in four parts, happening at different times. As things develop, one drives the other.

XX: In "The Frying Pan," I also wanted to bring out the work problems faced by the elderly and the social predicament of Chinese-language education in Hong Kong.

HFY: "The Frying Pan" is a delicate story; it's relatively short, but it is complete. Focusing on a family of four, the story is told through the monologues of the father, mother, son, and daughter. It's written with warmth, deep with flavor. The father is summoned to see his boss, and





the whole family is worried that he's going to be fired because of old age. On the contrary, he is promoted to the manager position. Everyone in the family is overjoyed. But there's another problem: he has to write reports in English but he doesn't know any English. What a headache. The son—the little brother in the family—has to do it; and not afraid of being a late beginner, the father also starts learning English himself. The story unfolds, alternating between joy and sorrow, a seemingly plain story with twists and turns. I think it's quite nice that the four characters appear in four separate scenes. For example, it's the father who goes to see the boss, so it is the father who narrates the meeting. And it's the son who teaches father English, and so this part is narrated by the son. This is a straightforward transition. The title of the story, "The Frying Pan," has a bit of dark humor, and it comes from a lesson in our primary school textbook, "a man and a pan." Conversely, the metaphor of "The Bowl" is more obvious. The female teacher puts a goldfish in a rice bowl, and she regrets not knowing how to take care of the fish. She feeds it many worms, and not long later the goldfish turns over. She doesn't want to be thinking of that dead fish while eating, so she throws away the

bowl. In Hong Kong, if you are teaching in a government school, it's said that you have got "a golden rice bowl." How twisted it is to put a goldfish in a bowl! Do you think I am right?

XX: They are all utensils. Chinese people say "bowl," while Westerners say "pan." When we were in primary school, the first lesson was "a man and a pan," what we might think of as a man and a bowl; and the second lesson was "a hen and an egg," chicken and egg. These make one wonder the peculiar relationships between cause and effect. . .

Ho Fuk Yan is one of Hong Kong's leading poets, essayists, and critics. He is a cofounding editor of the influential literary journals *Plain Leaves* and *Thumb* and the author of *The Topic of Time*, a collection of conversations with Xi Xi, and *Two Women Like Her*, a book of critical essays. He is also the editor of *Hong Kong Literature Series: Volume on Xi Xi* and *Floating City 1.2.3—A New Study of Xi Xi's Fiction*, as well as the coeditor of *Research Materials on Xi Xi*. Additionally, he has published three volumes of poetry and three prose collections.