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The present anthology brings together ninety-one short-stories written over the last three decades by some sixty writers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. In preparing this anthology we have scanned newspapers, popular magazines, literary journals, personal collections, and literary anthologies.<sup>10</sup> We are aware that any effort to anthologize is to remove the short-stories from their original interactive context, both social and historical. Nevertheless, by making these representative works available in English, we provide direct access to the contemporary Chinese experience and a chance for an enhanced understanding of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China today. It is also our wish that the anthology will become a means by which Chinese writers contribute to the genre's development in world literature.

The organization of the anthology brings in a touch of "interaction" between stories, and between the anthology and you, our reader. The ninety-one selected stories are divided into fifteen categories to confirm rather than confine their many possibilities: Grooming, Change, Choices, Governance, Games, Controversy, Anticipations, Creatures, Sharing, (In)fidelities, Nourishment, Weirdness, ?, Elegy, and Looking Backward and Looking Ahead. To validate the many facets of the leading motif for each group of stories, the categories are accompanied by

“cautionary tales” against extremism. The “tales” were written by Howard Goldblatt in the form of flash fiction, that is, extremely short fiction. These flash pieces, instead of directing reading, are intended to create mood, whet readers’ appetites, evoke their emotions, appeal to their intellect, and set the stage for their reading. This cross-cultural creative intertextuality, we hope, will constitute shared imagination, experience, and humanity beyond artificial national or cultural boundaries.

Interspersed among the ninety-one stories are notes on the genre by writers. We include them not just to enrich the reading experience but also to ease the anxiety that may have been caused by the absence of rigid definition. Obviously the selected writers and critics of the short-shorts have found their own ways to define the genre. By presenting how they imagine the art form and how they realize their imagination in practice, we hope to bring anchorage to the basics of the genre: freedom of form, expression, and function.<sup>11</sup>

As much as this anthology differs from other works of fiction in such established genres as short stories, novellas, and full-length novels, the facts remain: short-shorts are stories, and they belong to the extended family of narrative. Possessing all the features of fiction, a short-short is, as the famous Chinese saying goes, small as a sparrow but has all the vital organs. Wang Zengqi, a veteran writer from the mainland, categorizes short-shorts as a “branch of the short story genre” that “tests the limits of the genre.” Cross-bred with poetry, a short-short differs from a short story in that it contains more features of poetry, yet “has a style freer than that of narrative poetry and a plot-orientation stronger than that of lyric poetry.”<sup>12</sup>

Short-shorts are hybrids that resist definition. In the last three decades many names emerged to highlight one of their essential features. There has never been a literary genre, observed Xiu Shi, with as many varied and colorful names as the short-short. It has been named with reference to its duration (one-minute fiction), length (a story of a thousand words), image (palm fiction), related media (snapshot fiction), and subject matter (urban legends). While such names as “sudden fiction” and “palm fiction” indicate an obvious foreign influence, names like “having-a-puff fiction,” “the transitory mustard seed,” and “urban legends” bespeak local imagination and the genre’s Chinese heritage. Our collection of terms has exceeded forty, and we are still counting.

The love for the genre and the challenges the art form presents result in the plurality of this volume—with voices from both sides of the Tai-

wan Strait and writers of varied backgrounds. Many selected writers are famous for their works in established genres. They include, from mainland China, Wang Meng, one of the region's most reputable novelists and the former minister of culture; Wang Zengqi, a writer of many talents and among the best practitioners of the short-short genre; Ah Cheng, a prominent writer of stories, essays, and film scripts, and best known for his series of "king" novellas; and such eminent short-story writers and novelists as Lin Jinlan, Feng Jikai,<sup>13</sup> Liu Xinwu, Mo Yan, Cao Naiqian, Zhang Kangkang and Chi Zijian. From Taiwan we bring to you, among others, Chen Kehua, a medical doctor by profession and a poet and short-short writer by passion; and Yuan Qiongqiong and Ku Ling, Taiwan's most celebrated writers of short-shorts. Closely associated with the popular media, Ku Ling, as TV talk-show host, and Yuan, a writer of pop-song lyrics and scripts for films and TV drama, are known for their insights on relationships and abilities to draw material from real life. The selected writers from Hong Kong include the "Godfather of Hong Kong Literature" Liu Yichang, writer of Hong Kong's first stream-of-consciousness novel and chairman of the Hong Kong Writers' Federation; Zhong Ling, poet, essayist, literary critic, and educator of Buddhist visions; the veteran fabulist Xi Xi, whose touch of childlike innocence always inlays her incisive criticisms of life; and Ye Si, whose reflections on Hong Kong's "postmodern" specifics—its food, clothes, and traveling—bring Hong Kong to the world and vice versa. Extremely conscious of form and well versed in the art of fiction, they are willing to experiment and discover. Because they often produce representative works of artistic excellence and insights, this volume contains multiple selections from many of these writers.

A significant number of the selected stories are, however, from not-so-famous writers. These writers are nevertheless dedicated to the art both professionally and personally. Well trained and working in local literary and art circles such as municipal or country literary federations (Zhang Jishu, Zhan Jing, Liu Guofang, and Ling Dingnian) or as editors of national or local literary journals (Qin Yong and Bai Xiaoyi), they have been working in the form for years. Their persistent effort has produced many top-notch works that have been anthologized within and outside China. While asserting a critical spirit, humanist ideals, and traditional virtues, and while giving vent to popular dissatisfaction in their writing, these writers also nod to the opportunities commercialized society affords. They have been instrumental in making short-shorts a literature

both of commitment and of entertainment. Through their professional affiliations and functions, they have helped to bring professional writers off the pedestal and lay writers up into the “ivory tower.”

Yet a number of the selected stories are from practitioners of the art who make their living in professions other than literature. They publish their work in popular media for the love of the art. The writer of “Lover” and “Mothballs” is an eye specialist; the author of “Parting” is a local educator; “Home” was written by a first-class cook in a Qingdao rest home; the story of the crow and the fox comes from a county official in Shanxi Province; and the writer of “General” works in the security department of a local bank. Coming from outside the literary establishment and living among common people, these writers have easy access to popular sentiments and tastes, and are therefore in an advantageous position to articulate them. Their stories, unlike avant-garde works, which are impenetrable for most readers, have direct relevance to readers’ lives as living social and cultural beings. The immediate aesthetic appeal of their down-to-earth playfulness can be easily consumed by the majority of the population. The inclusion of these writers brings readers to the substrata of unofficial histories, undocumented memories, unspoken human predicaments, and intimate life-worlds. In so doing, the volume achieves a fuller presentation of contemporary Chinese life in general and of the art form of short-shorts in particular.

Many of you, our readers, may find the art form of Chinese short-shorts reminiscent of the economy of Hemingway, the profundity of Shinichi Hoshi, the irony of O Henry, the poignancy of Chekhov, and the alienation in Kafka. Those with some training in Chinese cultural traditions may enjoy the familiar “art of leaving blank,” that is, the art of articulating the most important by what is left out, like the expressive blank areas often found in traditional Chinese brush painting. Because of Chinese writers’ conscious effort to learn from other cultures, to incorporate different traditions, and to creatively reconfigure formal properties, the short-shorts in this anthology pleasantly frustrate expectations and challenge the boundaries of literary conventions. Like a video recording played in reverse mode, Cai Nan’s “Looking Back at the Moment of Death” allows the reader to fast search and to play slow motion or normal speed in reading. Chen Kehua’s “Lover” and “Mothballs” explore the intensity of one single moment at the expense of the plot. As Chen Hengchu’s “Promotion Report” blurs the line between literary and nonliterary discourses, Wu Yiming’s “Number

Eight” obscures the distinction between verbal and visual arts. While Wang Meng’s highly condensed prose on ordinary phenomena bursts with metonymical revelations, Wang Yanyan’s lyrical reliance on imagery replaces “story” with feeling. Zhong Ling’s “Contemplating Water,” with its Zen touch, is as enigmatic as Mo Yan’s “Horse Talk” is fantastic and elusive. The wild humor of Chen Shixu’s “What’s Up, Lao Cao?” is matched by the fuzzy logic in Xu Haiwei’s “The Principle of Rebound.” In “Division,” our capacity to reason is thwarted and our faith in absolute egalitarianism shattered as we ponder the mathematical problem of mosquito bites. Through its own aesthetic strategies, every story in this volume discloses some crystallized human moment, yet lingers and haunts with no attempt to exhaust the subject matter it broaches. With their characteristic open end, the selected short-shorts manifest distrust of the ultimate or absolute and signal a redistribution of power from author to reader.

In our effort to embrace diverse aesthetic representations and strategies, we include in this volume stories of various lengths (from about 125 characters to about 1,600) and of mixed genres (fables, parodies, romances, fairy tales, dramatic monologues, classical tales, anecdotes, prose poems, and popular or historical accounts). The narrative texts, often in the first or third person, may take the form of a letter, a report, a monologue, a sole narrative or one interspersed with dialogues or flashbacks. Their dominant motifs are beyond the scope of our categorization; the techniques of displacement, allusion, condensation and substitution are commonplace.

Such tolerance of formal flexibility, however, serves not only to rejuvenate calcified forms. The aesthetic freedom that short-shorts enjoy also affords endless artistic possibilities and makes it possible for the genre to encompass more diverse voices and perspectives. Such autonomy in art, to use Janet Wilson’s expression, brings to light the necessary “constitutive features of the society,” that is, the society’s capacity to “accommodate plural voices and promote alternative ways of thinking.”<sup>14</sup>

The first serious rendering into English of the multifarious genre, this volume, with stories ranging from portraits of psychological depths to allegorical treatments of social and cultural formulations, presents a gamut of human emotions and situations. Penned by a variety of authors who are no longer concerned with authorial expositions, the selected works focus on fragments, contingencies, and individuals trying to cope with basic issues of life. Despite the differences in political systems and

developmental stages among mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, short-shorts from all three regions share increasingly similar frustrations and hopes in the intimate private lives of individuals.

In the section entitled “Choices,” for example, the revelation in Taiwan writer Ku Ling’s “Jailbreak” not only resolves the structural puzzle of the story but also unveils, most intensely, modern man’s existential dilemma. In the same section, mainland writer Chang Gang shows, with his “‘Left’ with No Chance,” the absurdity of contemporary conditions where the “right” choice is wrong. Hong Kong writer Xi Xi’s “Sunday Morning,” conversely, uncovers a postmodern loner’s expected and limited choices through a set of multiple-choice questions with the obscurity of a poem. In the category of “(In)Fidelities,” Ku Ling embeds, with his “Confession of a Photographer,” a paradox of modern life in the illogicality of a successful career; in “Grooming,” two other Taiwanese writers, Yuan Qiongqiong and Chen Kehua, evoke universal sentiments by investing with new meaning the trivial acts of ear picking, nail clipping, and preserving winter clothes with mothballs.

Many of the short-shorts in this volume can also be read as testimonies to past ideological crazes and to the present economic and sociopolitical transformation in Greater China. For example, mainland writer Ah Cheng’s “Observe” and “Chimney Smoke” both remind and warn us of how politics is literally the decision concerning the apolitical body. In its surrealistic style and with self-deprecating humor, Lin Jinlan’s introspective “A Knock on the Door” mocks Chinese intellectuals’ sense of righteousness and infallibility. Unmistakably the change of sovereignty in Hong Kong looms large in Che Zhengxuan’s “Last Stop, Mongkok.” Turning to the seven stories in the section titled “Sharing,” we may note that each story involves the term in a most unconventional way. Six point to the negative impacts of tradition or modernization, with Ah Cheng’s story about “sharing” garbage particularly suggestive of a contemporary malaise—a fast-developing society trapped in an underdeveloped mentality and caught up in a vicious recycling of the unwanted. Both Zhong Ling’s “Killer Well” and Liu Yichang’s “Wrong Number” were inspired by actual events reported in the news. Coincidentally both representations of the news stories lend philosophical depth to the random play of probability in the life and death of human beings.

What is the current status of contemporary Chinese short-shorts? In Hong Kong, short-shorts are retiring from popular media to the ivory tower of serious literature. In Taiwan, short-shorts are still going strong

in both newspaper features and literary anthologies, the former a major source of the latter. Both commercial and literary presses have published series of better-known writers' personal collections of short-shorts. In both areas educators are making use of the genre to promote creative writing among students from primary to tertiary educational institutions. In mainland China, short-shorts have yet to be fully recognized in elite literary circles or accepted as a distinct literary form, which raises the question of what the future holds for short-shorts in China. One might argue that the elevated position of short-shorts in Hong Kong affirms, from a different perspective, its legitimacy and value as a new art form for a new age. But can the evolving popular genre bridge the gap between highbrow and lowbrow literatures? Will it suffer the fate of diminishing readership as other print literature has, especially when the even shorter mobile-phone literature has embarked on its commercial venture? Can the art form be expected to assume a dominant position in the literature of the twenty-first century? These questions make the dynamic phenomenon of short-shorts all the more fascinating.