

董啓章：少年神農

**The Young Shen Nong: excerpts**

By DUNG Kai Cheung

Translated by Ian Chapman

They called me Shen Nong. But I just felt like a kid.

Then later, I said I was Shen Nong. But they said I was just a kid.

I wanted to know what those who came later had said, so I turned to the ancient books. But first I had to learn to read. It was then that I realized I belonged to a bygone age. Though still a kid, I was already way too old.

In the beginning everything was perfect. The world fell into decline when Cang Jie invented writing.

I often think it was writing that killed Lei. Lei and I went together in search of the ultimate poison. We searched as high as the heavens, as low as the earth; east to Fusang, west to Mount Yanzi; south to Dongting Lake, north to Youdu.<sup>1</sup> Our journey lasted countless cycles of the sun, moon and stars, but throughout she remained a beauty in the prime of youth. Right up until the year Cang Jie invented writing—then she began to age. Fifty years later I buried her at Guiji with my own two hands. There I happened to come across Yu unleashing his heavenly host against Gong Gong. Though I knew my grandson Gong Gong was again in great peril, all I could do was sit crying before her grave: crying not just for the death of Lei, but for my powerlessness to go with her.

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<sup>1</sup>Fusang: huge tree atop Yanggu, where the sun rose; Mount Yanzi: where the sun set (in modern Gansu); Dongting Lake: modern Hunan; Youdu: mythology's bleak subterranean netherworld, in the Bohai Sea.

Life weighs on me like a heavy burden; of all the sufferings life has brought me, immortality is the cruellest. All because I'm Shen Nong, who has tasted the hundred herbs and sorted sweet spring waters from bitter.

My only consolation is that Lei's name is not recorded in the ancient books.

It says in these books that I would ingest seventy poisons in a single day. Actually that's stretching it a bit. In those days we simply didn't have the range of toxins that were to appear later, and besides, my masochism hadn't reached quite that level. But certainly a few poisonings was all part of a normal day's work. And it was something I had no choice in.

I'd wager that no one but Lei would believe this, but what got me started chomping herbs was pure boredom. As you should know (though no matter if you don't), I'm a hybrid creature with an ox head and human body. And being half-bovine, like all that species I endured a childhood of unimaginable tedium. From weaning to yoking, a young ox's days are passed in chewing this, chewing that, chewing whatever. Being exceptionally bored and highly inquisitive, I rather recklessly chewed my way through scores of plants completely unknown to me. Fortunate not to pay for this folly with my life, I did come to know something of the properties of various species. Once word got around, people began plying me with all sorts of strange and exotic things. In this way I unwittingly became the world's first victim of biological experimentation.

I was, however, by no means your average run-of-the-mill ox. So when I grew up I fashioned a career from eating plants, and what's more taught people how to grow grains both beneficial and good to eat. That was when people started calling me Shen Nong, 'the Wizard Farmer', and my fame spread further than the endless golden fields of rice. They would say: On a road bathed in golden light Shen Nong walks into the sun, his herb basket on his back, swishing a willow switch or reed cane (some even said it was a magic whip for testing herbs).<sup>2</sup> His shadow grows longer as he shrinks into the distance. The men and women emerging at dawn to begin their labours cast looks of hope after his receding figure. Then in the twinkling of an eye the sun is sinking into the west, and on weary legs Shen Nong wends his way homeward over hill and vale, a solitary figure. People go anxiously to meet him, not knowing whether today he will return beset with fever or dizziness, fainting or convulsions, vomiting or diarrhoea. But regardless of the symptoms, just so long as someone has remembered to fix him a bowl of tea he'll be straight back on his feet and a whole lot wiser.

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<sup>2</sup>According to one variant of the legend Shen Nong tested plants' toxicity and heat/cold properties by striking them with a magic 'red whip' 赭鞭 .

Bringing forth the tea was a beautiful maiden. I first laid eyes on her at the tea grove. I'd just ingested a newly discovered herb, and was experiencing some numbness in the legs. I collapsed to the ground just by the tea grove. She emerged from among the trees and helped me to my feet, asked what was up. I said I was Shen Nong, had just been poisoned and was unable to move. Without another word, she tossed aside her straw hat and hoisted me onto her back. It was then that I noticed this young girl's face, her fair and delicate features. But despite her slightness of frame her strength knew no bounds, and she bore me at a gallop straight across the fields towards the settlement. I grabbed a handful of tea leaves from the bamboo basket strapped about her waist and began chewing on them. I knew that I'd recover in no time at all. The smell of the young grain shoots mingled with the pure, sweet aroma of her neck, like a kind of lush fruit. My name's Lei, she said beneath a peach tree.

It's easy for things not properly understood to be blown out of proportion. My thing with eating plants was at first the product of boredom, then later a habit. But people started thanking me and singing my praises. One day they not only sat me down to dinner but asked me to be their leader. Then somehow I went from tribal chief to king of ten thousand people to emperor of all the region.<sup>3</sup> My memory of the considerable chunk of time between my sudden enthronement as Emperor Yan and when I faked death and left with Lei is as riddled with holes as a lost ancient text. Sometimes I think I'm nothing but the shadow of Shen Nong. Shen Nong lives solely in his world, a world which, far from destroyed by time, will live on forever in the ancient books. My world decayed to nothing along with Lei's bones beneath the ground. I'm nothing but a shadow beneath the resplendent glory of the written word, dragged along a distance behind the halo of civilization, my face blurred, wishing to speak but unable. Though my body is immortal, I will slowly die even within my own memory. But even a shadow has a right to its story.

I can't rightly say how long I ruled as Emperor Yan; nor can I offer any explanation for my meteoric rise from tribal chief to Heavenly Emperor of the South. You could say that was the age's shortcoming, but also one of its advantages. Though as Emperor Yan I apparently begot a line of gods with supernatural powers, I myself had no divine potency, nor any special talent for ruling for that matter. What I liked most was to climb the magic *jian* tree<sup>4</sup> up into the clouds, and from there to gaze down upon my realm, with its criss-cross paths and fields stretching as far as the eye could see. I would watch the wind-blown golden waves sweeping across the paddy fields, the flocks of birds circling the mulberry trees. But whenever I thought of the girl who had carried me home and brewed me some tea, a terrible loneliness came over me.

It says in the ancient books that I died from eating gelsemium. But that was just a little ruse of mine. In fact since childhood I'd eaten so many plants, both toxic and nutritious, that I'd become quite immune to all toxins, as well as to ageing and death. This might be what most people dream of, but no one appreciates what torment immortality is. As to why I suddenly feigned death and upped and left, I can offer no good explanation. Perhaps it was missing Lei, perhaps I was tired of shouldering other people's burdens, perhaps it was really a death wish. At any rate, it was not an age in which much attention was paid to causal logic.

So I ate the gelsemium, faked my own death, then secretly made my escape.

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<sup>3</sup>Yan was Emperor of the South: a different emperor ruled at each cardinal point, with the Yellow Emperor presiding over all from the centre.

<sup>4</sup>The *jian* tree linked heaven and earth, and was used by gods and mortals alike to travel between the two. It was thought of as the centre of the world.

On the road I heard that Sui Ren<sup>5</sup> had taken over as Emperor Yan, and was telling people to give up vegetarianism and start eating meat. But I felt this was no longer any of my business. What did perplex me was the realization that a name was just like a piece of clothing, that others could put it on and take it off at will. So sometimes you can't be sure who is who, or even who you are yourself. Well am I, or am I not, Shen Nong? Are, or are not, Shen Nong and Emperor Yan one and the same person? So am I, or am I not, Emperor Yan? Such questions swam round and round in my head as I hurried towards the small tribal settlement from which I had first started out.

After a journey lasting from new moon to full, I finally arrived in Lei's native place. My slowness was yet more proof that I wasn't really cut out to be a heavenly emperor. When the sun rose, with the moon still in the sky, I could already smell the rich fragrance of tea, and hear the songs the tea-picking girls sang to wake themselves for the day. Pausing at the edge of the grove, with one glance I picked out Lei from the dozens of tea pickers. She wore no straw hat; her long, black hair was woven into a plait, which wrapped around her waist. The hands picking the leaves were as delicate, soft and fair as ever. I plucked a ripe peach from a tree and threw it towards her: it landed right in the basket at her waist. She looked up in surprise, and saw my figure in the distance. Despite the big straw hat I wore to disguise my identity, she knew instantly it was me.

What a long plait! I said, taking it in my hands as she drew near.

I've been waiting for your return! she laughed, blushing.

All these years, and you don't look a day older!

So? You're still a deadeye with a peach, anyway!

I laughed too, taking her hand as we walked off together. We had soon left the tea grove far behind, heading nowhere in particular, just walking.

She took a bite from the peach in her basket. The juice glistened on her lips.

We came to the East China Sea, across which lay the Land of the Birds. I'd heard Shao Hao had things going nicely there, so we thought we'd migrate.<sup>6</sup> As we waited on the shore for a change of wind, I looked up to the sky to see a small bird with speckled head, white beak and red feet. It clutched a twig in its mouth, which it then dropped into the sea. I said to Lei: That's Jing Wei. Actually she's my daughter Nü Wa. She drowned here many years ago.<sup>7</sup> My other daughter Yao

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<sup>5</sup>Sui Ren 燧人 discovered how to make fire.

<sup>6</sup>Shao Hao 少昊 established a kingdom across the sea in which all the officials were birds. He later returned to the mainland as Emperor of the West.

<sup>7</sup>After drowning, Yan's daughter Nü Wa 女娃 turned into the bird Jing Wei 精衛, which then set about trying to fill in the East China Sea stick by stick, stone by stone.

Ji died too, and became a jade plant on Mount Guyao.<sup>8</sup>

But you're still so young! she said, stroking my boyish ox face.

That's my greatest sorrow.

Do you want to die?

Yes.

Then let's go! Let's go in search of the ultimate poison!

With that she rose to her feet, brushed off the sand, and gave me her hand. We turned back and made for Mount Kunlun. Perhaps the Yellow Emperor would be able to help.

On the road to Kunlun we chanced upon my grandson Gong Gong, who was at war with Zhu Rong.<sup>9</sup> They were bombarding each other with water and fire, sending the whole region into total anarchy. Lei asked me why I didn't go and put a stop to it. I said: I'm not Emperor Yan anymore. We thought we'd just detour around it, but that no-good kid Gong Gong couldn't take losing and with a mighty head-butt sent Mount Buzhou lurching to one side. That of course brought half the sky crashing down, and torrents of water surging down from the heavens to engulf the land.<sup>10</sup> With the waters about to reach us, Lei and I quickly hollowed out a big gourd, and hid ourselves inside. When the waters rose level we simply floated off in the gourd. We remained afloat for sixty days. Not a speck of land was visible anywhere, but Lei was not in the least afraid. She just laughed, and joked that we were just like our ancestors, the brother and sister Fu Xi and Nü Wa.<sup>11</sup> At this point Nü Wa, who was probably quite used to floods, crawled out from years of seclusion to patch up the hole in the sky with some five-coloured stones she had made. The waters subsided and our gourd came to rest in some completely uninhabited wilderness. Thinking of my drowned daughter, I began to weep.

Your daughter would have been about my age, wouldn't she? said Lei.

I nodded.

But you're still so young!

Lei kissed my long forehead, and we coupled in the open. It was Lei's first time, and it seemed like the first time for me too. Perhaps I had never had daughters, had never had sons or grandsons like Gong Gong and Zhu Rong. I was just a kid

<sup>8</sup>Since Yao Ji 瑤姬 had tragically died just as she reached the age for marriage, she became a jade plant whose fruit, when eaten, made one attractive to the opposite sex.

<sup>9</sup>Gong Gong 共工 was an unruly water god, with a human head and the body of a snake. Zhu Rong 祝融, probably Gong Gong's son, was the fire god, and Yan's main assistant.

<sup>10</sup>Mount Buzhou was one of the pillars supporting the heavens.

<sup>11</sup>Fu Xi 伏羲 and Nü Wa 女媧 (a different mythological figure from that mentioned in footnote no. 7) survived an earlier deluge in the same way, before re-peopling the world by joining as man and wife. Nü Wa was of course the original creator of mankind, whom she made out of clay.

who knew nothing about what went on between men and women; who for all the plants I'd eaten, had never tasted that hidden fruit. It tasted of death; of my life's most sought-after treasure. I held Lei's soft, fair, tender body, inhaling her peach-like aroma, and thought: perhaps death and survival are one and the same thing.

How can you have stayed so young? I asked, my lips close to her ear.

Because I live in your mind.

Lei and I bore no children, but that didn't bother us in the least. In fact I was glad to be spared the agony of seeing more children go to their deaths before me. We were each other's child, since we were still so young, and would stay young for ever: for this was an age of childlike innocence, an age in which knowing was experiencing, not knowing was not having experienced. Perhaps we lived in ignorance, but what we did know we had learnt first hand. Life was so real: it was your body's every moment of sensation. With each mouthful of herbs, with each kiss of Lei's body, my experience was enriched. And experience was the only thing I could count on. It is in experience that I exist, and in experience also that I must seek death.

Whether it was before or after the Battle of Zhuolu that Lei and I arrived at Mount Kunlun is now impossible for me to say. That thing called 'time' had not yet been invented. What if it was before Lei and I even began our travels, or after we parted at the border of life and death? What difference would it make? After a tortuous crossing of the Flaming Mountains, we stood by the Feeble River which encircled the foot of Kunlun, and gazed up towards the summit to behold the splendour of the Yellow Emperor's lower capital.<sup>12</sup> On this very mountain grew the immortal celestial peach tree that blossoms and fruits only once each millennium; might not also be found here the world's deadliest poison, by which I could bring my life to an end?

By the Feeble River Lei asked: If I were to drown here, would you cry? I said: I would dive into the deepest pool to go with you. She put her finger to my lips, saying: No! You can't drown! You're Shen Nong, and there's only one possible way you can die—by poisoning. I made no reply, just stared despondently at the smooth, ripple-free water, so clear that it seemed to reveal the very depths of the world. A gust of sultry wind blew from behind, gently ruffling Lei's short plait and thin tunic. Her long hair had been severed with a stone axe by one of Chi You's Miao warriors at Zhuolu.

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<sup>12</sup>Mount Kunlun was the earthly (hence 'lower') capital of the Yellow Emperor, the supreme ruler. It was said to be ringed with perpetually flaming mountains, and by a river which was so 'feeble' that not even a feather could float on it.

Taking a large buoyancy leaf from our bag and putting it under our feet, we stepped onto the Feeble River. It is said that a buoyancy leaf is the only thing capable of floating on the Feeble River. We held out our arms, and let the hot wind blowing at our backs from the Flaming Mountains fill our broad sleeves and propel us towards the opposite bank. After a smooth crossing of the Feeble River, we spent fifteen days and nights clawing our way up the nine cliff faces surrounding Kunlun, before finally reaching the due east-facing Kaiming Gate. I explained my business to the Kaiming Beast, guardian of the gate, adding that I was Shen Nong, the Emperor Yan.<sup>13</sup> But the Beast took me for a liar and refused me entrance to the citadel. It said: Chi You has just driven the Emperor Yan to Zhuolu; the Yellow Emperor has gone to his rescue.<sup>14</sup> How can you be the Emperor Yan? It menaced us with its nine human heads, and sent us unceremoniously on our way. What on earth could be more ludicrous: now people don't even believe I'm Shen Nong—not even with my ox head!

The entire ordeal had been completely in vain. I began to despair of ever being able to die. But Lei consoled me, saying: Let's seek out the Yellow Emperor at Zhuolu! I'm not sure how many years that battle raged: let's just say that at some point in its duration, we arrived within the proximity of the battlefield. There was a dense fog that day, and the Yellow Emperor and his host, with the help of their compass chariot, were breaking an encirclement.<sup>15</sup> The two sides' savage beasts and demons pitched cruelly into the fray. I had never seen such carnage in all my life. I just stood there eyes agog and mouth ajar, trembling from head to toe. The Ying Dragon passed overhead, its sights fixed on some of Chi You's grisly horned brothers.<sup>16</sup> Then suddenly we were caught off guard by two Miaos<sup>17</sup> charging out from behind a tree. They were armed with stone axes, with which they prepared to dismember me. Lei tugged at my tunic, and we took to our heels just as a stone axe came swinging downwards, severing Lei's long plait. As if that wasn't a close enough call, we then ran smack-bang into a *wangliang* demon. Its body was like a

<sup>13</sup>*Kaiming Men*, 'gate opening to the light', was the point of entrance of the morning sun.

<sup>14</sup>Chi You 蚩尤 was a giant deity from the south, probably another of Yan's descendants, who rose in rebellion first against Yan (in one version) and finally against the Yellow Emperor. They fought their decisive battle at Zhuolu, in modern Hebei.

<sup>15</sup>Chi You created a thick fog to confound the Yellow Emperor's forces; the Emperor was saved from a routing by his advisor Feng Hou 風后, who in the heat of the battle invented a chariot with an iron deity at the front whose arms always pointed south.

<sup>16</sup>The Ying Dragon 應龍 had been called in to drench Chi You with torrential rains, but was foiled by Chi You's preemptive winds. It made itself useful, however, by launching air attacks. Chi You had eighty-one brothers.

<sup>17</sup>The Miao 苗 were a tribe descended from the Yellow Emperor. Feeling spurned by him, they readily agreed to join Chi You in rebellion.

little baby, its skin was black with a reddish tinge. It had long ears and red eyes, its hair was glossy black. It spoke the human tongue. Shen Nong! Over here! It was Lei's voice and Lei's long hair. I was just about to go to her when a big rock came crashing down on the head of that beckoning baby, dashing out its brains. Lei threw away the rock, and taking my hand, shouted: Don't be fooled! That was a demon!

The battle raged on for three days, before the Yellow Emperor broke the encirclement and withdrew ten miles to plan a counter-strike with his senior officers. We gave up the idea of getting the Yellow Emperor's help, and made a quick exit from that hell on earth. As to how the Yellow Emperor later turned the tables on Chi You and put his foe to death, I couldn't be less interested. The world's a big place, said Lei. The Yellow Emperor can't be the only one with a few tricks up his sleeve! We're still young! But Zhuan Xu had already sent Chong and Li to cut down the *jian* tree linking heaven and earth, so there was now no chance of ascending to the heavenly palace to seek help.<sup>18</sup> We just spent endless days roaming the length and breadth of the land, before finally arriving back at the original place and time. Perhaps it was a thousand years in a day, perhaps one day that lasted a thousand years. But as long as we lived on this earth we would still have hope, for this world had been there before the beginning, and would still be there after the end.

There was a time when the climate turned unbearably hot and dry, and ten suns circled in the sky. Lei and I were on our way to Mount Yanzi. Throughout the west there were strong dusty winds, and waves of hot air surging up from the ground. The road was littered with the skeletons of man and beast. My lips were dry and cracked, my skin sizzled beneath the burning rays. But Lei's flesh was ice-cold, her skin as white as snow, as if the harsh radiation had no effect on her whatsoever. She was still the Lei of the tea grove of years before, the Lei with the fruit-scented neck. I knew that with her by my side I could safely overcome any adversity.

I no longer know what year or month we arrived at Mount Yanzi. It was from here that the sun returned to Yanggu to rest.<sup>19</sup> But after all this time there was still no sign of those ten suns, leaving Yanzi in an uncharacteristic pall of gloom. I had heard that the Western Queen Mother of Mount Yanzi also had an elixir of immortality, so there was no knowing what other weird and wonderful concoctions

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<sup>18</sup>The Chi You rebellion had severely drained the Yellow Emperor, so he relinquished the supreme rulership to Zhuan Xu 顓頊, formerly Emperor of the North. His first act in office was to send his ministers Chong 重 and Li 黎 to cut down the *jian* tree, so as to prevent other gods from causing trouble on earth.

<sup>19</sup>The sun set at Yanzi, rose again at Yanggu.

she might have. At that time the Queen Mother was a creature of unkempt hair, a leopard's tail and tiger's teeth. She lived in a dark, cold cave, which apart from a few dozen tripod cauldrons of varying sizes was singularly lacking in regal splendour. (Only later did I learn of the elegant robes and refined manners she had acquired by the time of King Mu's visit.)<sup>20</sup> Looking at the bleak state of things atop Yanzi I held no great hopes of procuring the medicine. Instead of introducing myself as Shen Nong I just presented her with some carefully dried topnotch tea, and got straight down to the business at hand. The Queen Mother, to our great surprise, let out a roar and then with complete alacrity fished a golden lozenge from a medicinal cauldron. She said it was the world's deadliest poison: no one could survive its ingestion.

Lei and I were overjoyed at our unexpected fortune. We stayed three days on the mountain, then taking the golden lozenge bade a joyous farewell to the Queen Mother. She beamed warmly as she waved us goodbye, and said the tea we'd given her was one of the best on earth. At the foot of the mountain we met a man with a huge red bow slung over his shoulder, about to make the ascent. I guess it was Hou Yi, going to ask the Western Queen Mother for the elixir of immortality. It wasn't until we returned to the central plains that we learnt this Hou Yi had shot down the nine suns, and that the world was once again at peace.<sup>21</sup>

But from the year the Yellow Emperor's official historian Cang Jie invented writing, Lei began to age. With Lei no longer up to roaming the land, we had to settle down in her native place. Her family and friends had died long ago—several generations had already come and gone there—so we were now complete strangers. The site of the tea grove had now been planted with mulberry trees for raising silk worms. The Yellow Emperor's wife Lei Zu made frequent tours to inspect silk production.<sup>22</sup> Lei became a weaver, working her shuttle in the darkness of the house, weaving her life away thread by thread. I, meanwhile, became a doctor, prescribing medicines for people's ailments. Lei's eyesight deteriorated, her skin grew dry and shrivelled, her hair became coarse. The year she turned sixty-six we made our last long journey, with me piggy-backing her to some of the places we'd visited before. We had discovered in our hearts something completely new: reminiscence. Through

<sup>20</sup>The first, less flattering description of the Western Queen Mother is based on an account in the *Shanhai jing* 山海經. The second refers to a description in the *Mutianzi zhuan* 穆天子傳, an account of a trip to the west supposedly made by King Mu of the Western Zhou.

<sup>21</sup>Shooting down the nine suns had incurred Hou Yi the wrath of Heaven. He and his wife Chang E, once immortals, were forbidden to return to heaven, so sought immortality on earth as a consolation. But Chang E took all the elixir herself, fleeing to the moon and leaving her husband to die as a mortal.

<sup>22</sup>Lei Zu 嫫祖 invented silk manufacture.

reminiscence we tried to recreate our world: but the old world was gone forever.

Lei caught a chill as we passed Guiji. Immediately I set about decocting some herbal medicine, but to no avail. Her time had come, she said. Sitting by her bed, I took out the lozenge the Western Queen Mother had given me fifty years before, and swallowed it down with water. Fifty years I had awaited this moment. But I was not poisoned and did not die. Rather, I was transformed into a dashing youth; in place of my ox head was a handsome face. I went into panic, tears streamed down my face. Lei reached out her hand, stroking my hair. She said: You're still so young! Her voice betrayed a deep sorrow.

Before dying Lei became a sixteen-year-old girl again, with her slim, delicate figure and snow-white flesh, which somehow seemed to faintly glow. Lei! I exclaimed. How can you be so young? Because I'm your dream, she said. With this, she kissed me on the forehead.

Early next morning I buried Lei at the foot of Mount Guiji. I sat before her grave weeping, stupefied, unable to understand why I hadn't died as well. There were troops streaming down the mountain. A kind-hearted soldier said in passing: Laddie, this is no place to be dawdling, get on home! The Emperor Yu's preparing a strike against Gong Gong, war could break out any minute!<sup>23</sup>

Get on home? Like where? My world no longer existed; I no longer existed. All that existed was the Shen Nong of the ancient books. I have no faith in the written word, no faith in history, and especially no faith in fiction, which was later banished from the Nine Schools.<sup>24</sup> But I can't deny, the Shen Nong of the ancient books is the only real Shen Nong. And in trying to tell this story of 'reminiscence', all I'm doing is stringing words together on a page. My version may be no more real than anyone else's.

It says in the ancient books: *The ancients ate wild plants and drank water, picked the fruit of the trees, and ate the flesh of mussels and clams. They were frequently afflicted with disease and poisoning. So Shen Nong began to teach the people to sow the five grains, using methods appropriate to dry lands and moist, rich lands and barren, hills and plains. He tasted the hundred herbs, and the sweet and bitter springs, teaching the people which to avoid and which to make use of. At that time, he would ingest seventy poisons in a single day.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>The water god Gong Gong was instructed by Heaven to punish humanity with floods, a command he heeded with pleasure. Later Heaven relented and decided to assist Yu 禹 in controlling the waters. The disgruntled Gong Gong made mischief for Yu, who was forced to take punitive measures.

<sup>24</sup>The major strands of ancient learning.

<sup>25</sup>From the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Chapter 19).

*Translator's Postscript*

'The Young Shen Nong' was one of two stories (the other being 'Androgyny' 安卓珍尼) which first brought Dung Kai Cheung to attention both in Hong Kong and Taiwan. First published in 1994, it received the New Writers' Short Fiction Merit Award from Taiwan's Unitas Literary Association in the same year. He has since enhanced his reputation with the short fiction collection *Androgyny* (featuring these and other stories) and a new novel *Shuangshen* 雙身.

This excerpt represents the first of the story's two fairly distinct sections. A complete version is planned for a future Renditions collection, but by way of contextualization a brief description of part two may be in order.

Part one ends with Shen Nong doomed to interminable life as a handsome, boyish-faced youth. In part two we meet this youth as a postgraduate pharmacology student at a 1990s Hong Kong university, where his peasant clothes and tirades against consumer society make him a figure of fun. He is of course also the very contemporary figure of the radical environmentalist (not, it must be said, a common sight on HK campuses). The narrator is now not Shen Nong himself but a female student, Zhao Lei, who despite herself feels strangely attracted to him. They become lovers, and she moves into his remote and insufferably pre-modern flat. Yet his insistent ideals make him as incapable of compromise in love—even for Zhao Lei, who in a sense is a reincarnation of Lei—as in life.

Does he find his long-awaited rest? An encounter with pesticide-sprayed vegetables leaves him critically ill—he has no immunity to industrial toxins, it seems—but there is some uncertainty as to the outcome.

In an interview Dung described the idea of experiential knowledge as central to the story's conception. "In ancient times Shen Nong gained knowledge from his own experiences. But people today have less and less opportunity to do that."<sup>26</sup> That dislocation, beginning in part one with the invention of writing, reaches its apotheosis in the automated modern world of part two.

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<sup>26</sup> *Reader's Choice Monthly* 讀書人, July-August 1996, p. 107.