

# 王安憶：髮廊情話

## Love Talk at Hairdresser's

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The tiny hairdresser's is housed in a temporary structure attached to somebody's exterior wall, occupying a corner of the sidewalk. A little further off is a junction leading to a noisy street. The proprietor used to work as a hairdresser for the salon across the street. He is about thirty, from the North Bank of the Yangtze River.<sup>1</sup> He perhaps may not be from there at all, because once he entered hairstyling, he could have naturally picked up the North Yangtze accent as such an accent seems to be regarded as a stamp of the trade and denotes authenticity in the hairdresser line.

Going along with his accent is his pale and delicate white skin, hair wiry and jet-black with sideburns neatly trimmed but a bit long. Still, he conveys a rather rural sense of fashion, with a degree of cheekiness that is offset by his simple and honest countenance. His face is pleasing and finely framed, with dark eyebrows, shinning eyes, full eyelids, and a straight nose. His look, compared with other men, has a touch of 'glamour', although overall his essential rural quality remains.

Men like the proprietor can be talkative, often on topics more of interest to women. Their feminine demeanours are reinforced by their Yangzhou accents: up and down, swinging and winding with flamboyant exaggeration, making them even more like gossipy women. Such a quality stands in fascinating contrast to their strong, manly physiques.

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<sup>1</sup> The North Bank of the Yangtze River is a region regarded by those from the South Bank as being peopled by rubes. It is a long-standing prejudice.

The hands of male hairdressers also hint of femininity, being white-skinned with a soft touch, like women's although longer and larger, so that they possess a weird kind of sex appeal. These male hands are shaped and nurtured by warm water, shampoo, conditioner, and hair—particularly the manipulation of women's hair. They exaggerate their motions as they operate the scissors, spiking upward, sliding downward, making a 'Ka-Tsa' sound as strands of cut hair ripple down. The other hand uses a comb to capture a clip of hair, and all at once the scissors reach in, everything looking a little chaotic. Quite a number of swift cuts, then the rhythm slows and meticulous combing follows, scissors carefully pressing close to the tips of the hair tips and then opening. An idiom comes to mind: 'Moves like a fast running rabbit; stays quiet like a demure maiden.'

However, this North of the River fellow—the proprietor, is rather quiet. His outfit stands out, too. He wears a black leather jacket that restricts his movements somewhat. Perhaps as the proprietor, he feels he must present a more formal image than his more casual compatriots. After all, his business is a startup, and he can't help being nervous. His demeanour has turned more serious.

In the shop, he takes care of haircuts and the blow-drying. His assistants, two young girls, take care of hair washing and setting for customers in for perms. With the girls around, the shop has its fair share of noise. They are probably from southern Anhui, although their accents are hard to place. There are traces of the North of the River dialect in the descending pitch of their intonations, but stronger are hints suggesting an even more northern origin. What stands out most, though, is fundamentally the roughness of their speech.

The girls are between their twenties and thirties, and they look strangely alike, perhaps due to their similar clothes. Their hairstyles are similar, too—thinly layered and short with hair spreading all over, covering their round faces, a look found in girl escorts. Their eyes gaze straight ahead, directly at what they are looking at, a characteristic common among bold, country women. Their several attractive facial features lie buried under their wooden expressions. They both wear tight fitting sweaters with nylon lace circling the neck, open-cuff sleeves, one apple green and the other peach pink. Both wear blue pedal-pusher jeans with inch-long openings at the cuffs. They wear round-toe, platform leather shoes with straps. Their clothes are fashionably tight—so tight they look constricting. After toiling outdoors as labourers, the clothes covering places where their bodies house muscle—shoulders, backs, arms, and buttocks—have been stretched out of shape.

When customers for hair washing take both chairs, the girls stand straight, side by side, behind them, first squeezing out the shampoo, then, with one hand rubbing it into the hair as if making dough, create a white bubbly froth. Next, both hands dig down to scratch the scalp, massage the head, and kneed the hair. They seem to be disciples of the same master: identical postures in raising their shoulders and lifting their arms, identical motions in scratching and massaging, all seeming in unison. They like to fondle hair, looking straight into the mirror in front, in direct eye contact with their customers, with such intensity as if wanting to dig out their clients' deepest secrets. In time, the girls turn to each other and chat. They talk and laugh loudly, a bit boisterously all in all.

The proprietor doesn't seem to mind, as he seems to be a quiet man whose mind is occupied with his own thoughts. The girls thereby grow indolent, simply going through the motions without any real results. When this happens the customer fusses: 'Come on. You've been fiddling around with my hair without getting deep down. Get to work.'

The scolded girl answers as if wronged: 'Well, just now a customer said my nails were too sharp!'

The customer says: 'It doesn't matter whether your nails are sharp. You're barely scratching the surface.'

The proprietor steps in by now, getting behind the customer and washing the hair himself. The girl withdraws, still looking as if she had been treated unfairly. She walks away to the wash-basin to rinse her hands, and then sits on one of the iron folding chairs by the wall. Her posture seems to say: OK! Wouldn't mind a break. The girls have become pretty crafty by now.

A few locals from the neighbourhood use the shop as their hangout, sitting in the shop when they have nothing else to do. To outsiders, there appears to be a long queue of customers. They push the door open without entering and simply shout: 'Long line?'

Those inside, afraid to lose potential customers, reply in chorus: 'No, no, no line! Come in!' Most of the loiterers are women, with some bringing their knitting, while others simply sit, rubbing their hands. Though idle, these women look tired and sloppy, as if they just got out of bed and came straight to the shop. Perhaps their look is not of weariness but the private atmosphere of their bedrooms, sluggish and untidy, so they cannot help looking slovenly. Sometimes, as one would expect, women would come into the shop in their usual unkempt manner, then,

after chit-chatting for a while, suddenly reappear transformed into new people: they had changed their clothes, put on make-up, their high heels tapping on the sidewalk with a confident ‘deng, deng, deng’ sound as they sashayed past the shop front without a look back, probably going someplace for a date. When they returned, the excitement had waned, and they brought with them a ‘the party’s over’ atmosphere.

They recall the mah-jong games the night before, the cheating, squabbling, and the winnings and losses at the mah-jong table, or a wedding banquet with things like the newly-weds’ manners and dress, the banquet size and its degree of lavishness, the social classes of the guests. It was as if a night-long orchestra, accompanied by songs and panpipes, had to end right here in this hairdresser’s shop by having these women dusting off the ashes from its flame. Additionally, their topics would involve things like the stock-market’s gyrations; labour disputes in the shop next door; gossip of the households in the lane; plus who was stingy and who was generous among the customers who had just left.

With these women around, the hair-wash girls are no longer bored, not to mention how much know-how they obtain from these city dwellers. Whenever the girls clash with finicky customers, the women step in to smooth things over. They are street-smart and accommodating in handling others. You might be puzzled by the mismatch: why do these women, with all their street sophistication, choose to hang out in this tiny shop with two Anhui girls? It’s unbelievable these women are so easy-going. In truth, though, residents of this metropolis are actually not so aloof as they are thought to be, and down deep they do not dwell much on matters like class division. They live among lots of people, loving the liveliness and bustle of life. What they fear most is loneliness. Their hearts are probably even less acerbic than the girls from the countryside.

But this is mostly the result of a sense of superiority. Because of their safe environment, they needn’t constantly be on their guard. Of course, they are also kind by nature. You might find it absurd to hear the phrase ‘kind by nature’ applied to these women, but it really is true. In living in this lively city for some years, one may discover it to be somewhat like the countryside, at least at its core. The alluring but superficial things on the surface eventually get washed away by the waves of time, leaving behind only what matters, which are simpler, more basic things that determine how a person lives his or her life. Therefore, when these women pass the time of day in the shop, few of them could guess what the two

hair-wash girls whisper about them behind their backs. When they get dressed up and sashay past the shop's glass door, they have no clue what the impenetrable mindsets behind those two pairs of eyes are conjuring.

Every morning around 9 a.m., the curtain behind the glass door opens, and the door is unlocked from the inside. Because of the twisting city streets the directions in which houses face can be odd, it's hard to explain how the sun would somehow cast its blindingly brilliant rays directly into the mirrors. In this eye-searing brightness, the two girls start to arrange the chairs and clean up the items on the mirror-stands even as they pause in front of the mirror to fix their hair and straighten their outfits. The scene is a bit like a theatrical stage with the curtain just opening.

If any customers arrive at this early hour, they would notice a thick odour in the air, which has a number of constituent parts. There is no way the customers could separate out the combination of the smell of bedding, body scents mixed with lotions, of foods like rice porridge, salty pickles, and fried dough, plus the electromagnetic fumes from the electric stove that has just been turned on. The two girls sleep here at night, and their folding beds, bedding, and pots and pans are all hidden behind the backdoor which faces the neighbours' back windows. A small open space, about half a square metre, surrounded by cardboard boxes, holds all this stuff, with a plastic sheet covering what's within. Every household facing this narrow street leaves items outside its door, so the hairdresser's pile does not seem unexpected or out of place.

After a while the proprietor comes in to check on things, then leaves again after making sure there is nothing for him to worry about. He returns in a few minutes, and still finding nothing to worry about, leaves again. He seems hard-pressed, as if having to deal with outside matters. With his own business and being his own boss, his appearance seems to have changed. His skin is darker, or perhaps coarser to be more precise, as if weathered by wind and frost. His demeanour conveys anxiety, replacing the self-confidence particular to those in the profession, that sort of easy relaxed attitude of one confident in his skills, almost amounting to a cheekiness. He seems absorbed in deep, weighty thoughts. His black jacket does not flatter him, making him look tough, stern, and weary, almost like a harried seafood peddler racing between the city and the countryside. His black leather shoes, covered with dust, show how much he has walked about.

After a few rounds of coming in and going out, the proprietor settles down in

his shop. When there are no customers for haircuts or blow-dries, he sits behind the counter, with mirrored glass shelves behind him. On the shelves are assorted shampoos, perm solutions, conditioners, and hair treatment wax. A large stiff card standing on top of the counter lists the item codes corresponding to the respective hair-dye colour samples. Although small, this hairdresser's stocks everything. Remaining behind the counter, the proprietor files his nails. Only this somewhat feminine action reveals one of the minor traits of his occupation.

He sits with his head lowered, neither paying attention to the girls' gossip with the women nor responding at all. The others almost forget he is there, although, oddly enough, all the talk seems to exist for his sake. Without him, the talk would be less enthusiastic, the topics more scattered, jumping here and there and lacking focus. This man, though silent, is nevertheless still the proprietor, and thus is the core of the place.

Now he sits here looking at the glass door. Outside, the street is busy as usual, with the familiarity of everyday life, from the faces of passers-by to their actions and behaviours. In the centre of this bustling city, in this street surrounded by residences, one can sense an atmosphere almost identical to the countryside, one that is relatively closed. Waves from the outside cannot get through, all they can do is to cause reverberations as they break against the shore. The proprietor's gaze is unfocused, a look shared by all entrepreneurs wrestling with their startups. After slaving away for a long time, they can't help asking themselves: what is the point?

The chatter in the shop is very lively, with the two girls in an expansive mood. Their hands are working on their customers' heads, their bodies swaying with a dancing rhythm. Soap bubbles are splashing into one customer's eyes, who complains once, then once again. By the third time, the atmosphere has become quite heated. The proprietor is getting up, emerging from behind the counter, but just before he reaches the customer, a person has pushed the hair-wash girl to the side, filling in for him. It is one of the women hanging out in the shop, who is also a regular, living above the dry-goods store at the other end of the street. Her husband is a businessman and she is a housewife, so when she has time on her hands she comes to sit at the shop.

This woman gets up from her iron folding chair to stand behind the customer. She rolls up her sleeves slightly, raises her arms, and moves her fingers briskly, combing up from the hair-line on both sides. The customer's forehead is instantly clean. She swiftly piles up the soap bubbles on top of the customer's head, then

digs in deeply to scratch and rub the scalp. She turns to smile at everyone, as if to say: How about this? She's childish in showing off her skills even as she makes it clear that she has done this before. Come to think of it, she looks a lot like the two girls too! Unexceptional yet passable facial features accompany her round face and short hair. All hair-wash girls seem to have come from the same mould, although she is more slender than the girls. And her outfit? She wears corduroy overalls with an embroidered patch of a cartoon bear on the front, giving her a childish appearance.

Looking closer, though, you'll see she is pregnant! You suddenly become not so sure. Moreover, you'll notice the way she looks at people. Unlike the two girls' directness, she is quite the opposite, her eyes are soft and mellow, as if nothing were seen, but in fact everything has been observed. You begin to think: This woman is not so simple! By now, she seems completely different from the two girls. The difference is fundamental, stemming from disparate experience, age, talent, and place of origin. Yes, the woman is a Shanghainese; she speaks the Shanghai dialect fluently. It's hard to judge her age—in her twenties, thirty maybe, or perhaps thirty plus? Anyway, she's in that age bracket. In Shanghai, men and women of that age speak with lots of slang and with an awkward pronunciation. This woman, however, speaks Shanghai dialect with a fluency and purity found in the older generation, revealing her heritage to be authentic Shanghai.

The customer is quieting down, but the girls are excitedly asking all sorts of questions, which can be summed up as: Ah! You were in this trade too! The woman tilts her chin up toward where the proprietor is sitting 'Yes, I owned a hairdresser's before.' Before her surprised audience has time to respond, she adds that she had worked in a dry-goods store as well. One more touch: she even owned a restaurant called 'Delicious!'. By this time people are growing suspicious and no longer feel surprised, as her claims are hard to believe. How long would it take to have been in these three businesses in sequence? How old is she really? They look at her smile—so self-satisfied, so childish and unable to contain herself—as if a kid telling a lie, she bats her eyelashes slyly: Believe it or not, so there.

The girls no longer look at her, leaving her alone to wash the customer's hair. Wearing a smile, she shampoos and conditions twice, then turns to the customer, 'Now you can go rinse off.' Taking the customer to the wash-basin, she returns the person to the girl who washes hair. She steps aside to stand next to the wash-basin with her hands held up, waiting for the customer to finish so that she can rinse

off her own hands. While waiting, she examines the soap foam on her hands with great interest. Using her fingers, she has arranged the froth into a needlepoint shape, with rays of sun landing on the apex of the froth. The sunshine roams on her face; her smile in the moving rays seems to carry an expression of loss. All is momentarily still in the shop, with only the 's-s-s' sound flowing softly with the water rinsing the hair, along with the gas heater switch making a 'puh' sound, turning on and off. The proprietor has buried his chin in his palms, resting his elbows on his knees, a posture like a child daydreaming.

'My hairdresser's was on Anxi Road. Do you know Anxi Road?' She asks. The girls shake their heads to say no. She continues: 'The road has been demolished now, but back then, it was really prosperous! It was famous in the Changning district for selling clothes and was nicknamed "Little Huating". My hairdresser's was at the end of the garment street, or perhaps I should say it was separated from garment street by only a cross-road. I was somewhat familiar with that location although I lived near Huaihai Road. I knew the area because the shop my friend lent me for my small dry-goods store was on Anxi Road.'

The girls turn around toward her, listening to what she says. The customer has finished rinsing and been sent to her chair. The proprietor gets up, ready to blow-dry. The girl steps aside, wiping her hands with a dry towel. The woman advances to the now vacant basin, turning on the faucet to rinse the foam from her hands, then pauses for a moment, wearing a smile on her face. She uses both hands, one after the other, to hold the spray and rinse each hand. The spray from the falling water forms a soft curve, then joins into a small stream. The humming noise from the electric blow-dryer is heard everywhere in the shop, and the rays of sunshine penetrating the glass door and window seem suffused with the smell of hair, making the atmosphere seem somewhat sticky and oppressive. After she finishes washing her hands the girl hands her a dry towel; she does not take it, only tapping both sides of her hands on the towel to dry them off. She then returns to her folding chair and sits down. 'What happened later?' One of the girls asks. She lifts her face, smiling, taking in the questioner with an inquisitorial look. 'I mean, why did you give up the dry-goods store for a hairdresser's?' The girl explains her own question.

'Oh,' she responds as if she just realized what the question was. 'Dry-goods store business, you know, has a razor-thin profit margin. If you do not have a special wholesale channel, you're going to bleed to death. Those wholesalers! Had



you dealt with them once, you'd have been sick to your stomach for three days!' She pauses suddenly, realizing she has almost spoken of things she shouldn't. She then continues:

'I borrowed the retail space on Anxi Road from my friend. Since I didn't own it, I could not stay there for long. Therefore, after working for a while, I wanted to work for myself. But what could I do? While I was at home looking for a job, I went with the girl next door to take hairdressing classes, and after class, we would practice washing each other's hair. After a while, I outdid her.' She raises her chin as if saying: Didn't you all see earlier how good I was?

'I thought then, why not open a hairdresser's? The good thing about Anxi Road was that doing business there was fun, no pressure. I had lots of friends there, and everyone depended on friends so naturally we were willing to help each other. Of course, people from Anxi Road are different from us on Huaihai Road. Even here,' She points downward to where she is standing. 'Even the people here in the Jing'an Temple area are different from us on Huaihai Road. The girls from Huaihai Road really stand out wherever they go. It's neither in their appearance nor in their way of speaking. Well, maybe I should say just a little bit of each, but these are not the main differences. What's most important is perhaps the way they carry themselves with such a graceful aura.' She smiles a little, looking a shade self-conscious in using the phrase 'graceful aura', as if she were being immodest. She goes on:

'Still, people from Anxi Road have their own good attributes. They are very willing to help others. More importantly, just as I said earlier, any serious matter was turned into fun. When listening to them, you wouldn't believe what they would say. Were they boasting? Even a boast requires some basis. But they really seemed to mean what they said. Want to open a hairdresser's? No problem, my friend learned his hairdressing from a Hong Kong master and was styling only for celebrities. Need a shop front? No problem. The Anxi Road garment district was planning an expansion to include more varieties of business. My friend knew the district chief; just need to speak to him. Another friend happened to sell shampoo and could sell at wholesale price. Besides, I also had friends or friends of friends at the Bureau of Industry and Commerce, Bureau of Health, Labour Service Company, Public Security Authority. With just a few words anything could be done.

'Of course, in actuality, no such good luck exists; otherwise everybody would be rich. That hair stylist friend did not learn his trade in Hong Kong but in Wenzhou,

although in all fairness he had worked for a short while at a hairdresser's run by a Hongkonger. He asked for a sky-high wage plus housing and transportation subsidy, although it turned out he was not even from Wenzhou but rather from Deqing, a town in the countryside belonging to Wenzhou. Not only was the garment street not planned to expand, but was at risk of being torn down. Several residents in the area were prominent, including deputies to the People's Congress, members of Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and so on. They were constantly griping about the garment street. You know the whole Anxi Road area used to be very quiet with mostly Western style residences.

'The shampoo salesman indeed came daily to my dry-goods stand. At the time, I still was in that line of business. He carried a briefcase filled with samples arranged into grids, looking almost like the shelves in a Chinese herbal medicine store. The products looked authentic but actually were counterfeits, manufactured by underground factories near the railway station, and he sold them everywhere. As soon as I started I realized there were all sorts of difficulties, but I was stuck. At first, I was simply dabbling in my business, but after getting into it I became serious. My stubborn nature came out and I was determined to succeed! So eventually I did open the hairdresser's, and it was indeed situated on the other side of the cross-road. Government policy was for a time lenient because the government wanted to create jobs for those seeking employment, and to help local government at the neighbourhood level create revenue. However, shortly thereafter the policy was tightened again. Apart from my hairdresser's, there was no other newly opened store. My hairdresser's was stuck in the side of an alley, long and narrow, with the door of my shop facing in and opening toward the opposite wall of the alley.'

While the woman is talking, two customers, a man and a woman, enter. The proprietor shaves the man's face first, and then colours the woman's hair. She has stared for a long time at the sample colour pad, concentrating hard, then at long last made her pick. The two wash girls, fascinated, listen to the storyteller, which does not make them any less productive than when they chat. Somehow, their rapt attention enables them to calm down and their hands to work less impetuously. The proprietor remains silent. He is a quiet man, and even when he needs to communicate with customers, he uses gestures as much as possible, for example, nodding or shaking his head, or signalling with his hands. When he must speak,

he keeps his voice low and uses the fewest words possible. The woman telling her story, however, speaks smoothly and clearly, her voice carrying through the shop, over the scissors' cutting pitch, the water flowing from the spray nozzle and the whispers between the proprietor and his customers.

'How did the business go?' One of the girls asks. The woman does not respond directly, but continues on her original track.

'On the grand opening day, everyone—namely all my friends from the Anxi Road garment district—came to celebrate by shooting off firecrackers. Among them was a man that everyone called "Old Grand Master"'. She pauses again, changing the subject. 'I'll get back to you about him later. Did you ask me how my business was?' She looks at the girl who had asked her the question. This detour has interrupted the flow of her speech. Perhaps she needs a break to readjust her rhythm. She then continues: 'Speaking of my business, it was OK. People came mostly for a hair-wash. More than half my customers were my friends, coming to "goose" my business.' She smiles, adopting an apologetic look because she has just used rather coarse slang.

'Hairdresser's of this type were in an awkward spot. Average people were used to going to state-owned barber-shops. There was one such place operated by the neighbourhood committee in the next lane, where it cost only five yuan to get your hair washed. The better off preferred hair salons or beauty spas owned by Hong Kong or Taiwanese investors. Then there were the privately owned hairdresser's, often located on the borders between the city and the suburbs where migrant workers lived. Although called "hairdressers", the girls there did not even know how to wash hair.' She pauses again, skipping the details.

'Those other than friends who came to my shop were mostly teenage girls from high school who had just learned about fashion. Because Mom and Dad did not allow them to go to a hair salon, they came to my type of place instead. Most of them had long straight hair, long enough to reach just above their waists. They were so young that they still had baby hair on the sides of their foreheads. They came into my shop holding a bottle of shampoo from home and would sit down on the chairs, calling out: "Auntie, give me a full massage for my head and hair!" Don't underestimate these girls because of their youth. They had already picked up the bad temper of white-collar types. One moment they would fuss, saying the scalp scratching was too firm. The next moment they would gripe that the massage wasn't deep enough. Sometimes they would complain that the hair

washing technique caused dandruff. Other times they would squawk that the blow-dryer was too close, causing split ends. They hardly knew anything, but they still spoke with a commanding tone. You couldn't be tough with them so I could only "screw around" with them.' She chuckles for she has used slang again.

'After mixing it up with these young girls for so long, I almost forgot what to do when a customer came in for real hair styling. Of course, the adult customers were few, just a handful of middle-aged "Old Aunties"<sup>2</sup> who mostly wanted a hair-set and a blow-dry. Even if some were really fashion-conscious it still posed no problem—my master hair stylist was well trained; he used to work for the city's top hair salon, "Violet Hair Salon". The worst to come in were the oddballs, out of the mainstream. However, the more you fear certain things, the more likely those things will seek you out. One day, not too early and not too late, came such a person.' She suddenly stops, releasing her arms that had been crossed in front of her midsection, and puts her hands into her overall side pockets. She straightens her waist, and her abdomen becomes more pronounced, and she stands with her feet joined side by side pointing forward. Then she continues: 'He wanted to have his head shaved.

He was a customer with a bare head, with just a layer of very thin hair, and he wanted to shave it all off. He entered like this: Pushing the door open with one foot inside and the other out, he asked, "Do you shave heads?" as if he had been unsure and was only trying his luck.

'My master hairdresser couldn't help laughing, and immediately responded: "Get your shave at a shaving stand!" He was just kidding, because nobody had seen a shaving stand before.

'Just at that moment, for reasons I cannot explain, boom! I stood up and cut the master hairdresser off declaring: "Shave him!" Afterward, I thought about it, realizing my shout was not due to a momentary random whim but was intended. I felt this man was no ordinary bald guy.'

Again, she smiles. The two girls smile as well, asking: 'Not ordinary, how so? Explain yourself!' She stops for a moment. Although short, this momentary pause is noticeable because up to this point she has been such a polished speaker. It was as if too many memories rushed forth all at once. She stops for a moment, then continues:

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<sup>2</sup> 'Old Aunt' 老阿姨 is Shanghai slang, referring to older women looking cheap and pretentious in a futile attempt to appear youthful and appealing.

'If he were an old man, or a migrant worker, or somebody from the country, or looked scruffy, or, how shall I say this, if he in anyway looked as if he should have just an ordinary clean-shaven head, I would by no means have tried to detain him. But this one was different. He was young; well, not too young, about thirty. He was wearing a black padded coat made of satin-venetian with a traditional Chinese high collar. At the time, the traditional Chinese style for men was not as fashionable as it is today. On first glance, it looked like a Taoist monk's robe. His trousers were black in the western style. His black shoes were also made of satin-venetian fabric, in traditional Chinese style with a round opening. He was carrying a bag, a very strange one. Do you want to guess what kind? It was a canvas bag that had been washed so much it had faded. A five-pointed-star was sewn onto it; it was a military book bag. He looked so strange, but he was not ordinary; he was quite extraordinary.

'I invited him in to sit down, shook open the nylon apron, put it on him, tied it on, then fetched the tools from the mirrored drawer. Everyone in the shop was watching me, wondering how I was going to start. I stared at my hands, first picking up an electric shaver, then a pair of scissors, first a big one, then a small one. As soon as I held that pair of small scissors in my hand, I at once made up my mind: That was it.

'I am like that, doing everything based on my instincts, with my instincts concentrated in my hands. For me action has to come before thinking in many things: I have to do them first before I think about them, or before I can make any sense out of them. Once I actually do something, I naturally understand what it's about. When I was little, it became popular with the girls living in my lane to make lace using latch needles. We shared designs and passed them around, along with books containing photos and instructions about the needle work. I did not want to look at them: all I wanted was my latch needle and thread. With these in my hands, coiling the thread here and there, then using the latch needle, I could make any pattern I wished. Adults all praised my handwork skills. They would often say: "You want good handwork? Just look at her!"

'So, just then I was holding a pair of small scissors, and I went back over to the customer, then lowered his chair one notch because he was tall. He looked at



the small scissors in my hands without saying a word and I had no idea whether he was trying to figure out if I were up to the task or not. I felt I was able to do the job anyway. Afterward even my master hairdresser asked me where I learned to shave, telling me the moment I took the scissors he realized I knew what I was doing. In fact, not only had I never learned it, but I had never even seen it done before. I simply knew I could not use a shaver or a razor, because doing so would put us on the same level as shaving stands. But ours was a hairdresser's; our customers were of that sort, and so we had to stay on the cutting edge of fashion.

'I took the scissors without hesitation. Starting from his hairline, I cut little by little, moving toward the back. Small scissors have shorter blades, resulting in fewer "angles". In short, the idea is to have smooth curves only. The baseline is to have no angles. This customer had a great head shape, namely, round. Don't you laugh! You've come into contact with more heads than you have with people. Are all heads round? No! It's fair to say most heads are not round, or at least not completely round. Most heads have convex or concave portions. But not him! His head was not only round without any unevenness, but also smooth, no scabs or scars. If everyone were to be shaved clean, you would find imperfections on pretty much everybody's head. He was the exception. Therefore, he dared to go for a completely hairless head. A clean-shaven head is not for everyone. The head must fit the look.

'This head took me an hour and a half to finish. The cut hair was almost as fine as powder. While I had all my attention focused on his head, I knew he was staring into the mirror the whole time to follow my hand movements. Later he told me that in the past his head had always been shaved by his girlfriend using an electric shaver. They were both from the Theatre Academy, he being a faculty member and she a student. Because his girlfriend was out of town shooting a TV series, he had to find some place to shave his head. He had walked quite a few blocks, and walked by many hairdresser's, none of them shaved heads, but he finally found my place. He and his girlfriend rented a one-bedroom apartment on Wuyi Road, not too far from Anxi Road. After that, he often came to my shop. He told me all this later.'

The story is proceeding to a critical point, and the atmosphere in the shop is getting tense. It is about two or three in the afternoon, a slow time for business. The two girls are sitting next to the speaker, one on her left, the other on her right. The proprietor is dozing behind the counter, seemingly uninterested in the story yet with no intention to interrupt the endless tale. He really has changed, becoming

so out of character for a hairdresser. Hairdressers typically enjoy gossip, tirelessly working grapevines. But this one has become so indifferent. While the girls are waiting for the story to continue, the woman unexpectedly changes the topic:

‘Did I mention earlier an Old Grand Master? He was one of my friends in the garment business on Anxi Road. We called him Old Grand Master, firstly for his age, already forty at the time, and secondly for his social savvy. His social skills were not so much applicable to business but more in his conversation. Whenever he sat down to talk, the proprietors on Anxi Road would all forget about their work and gather around him to listen. It was said that when he was jailed, his case handler found him so spellbinding that he ended up forgetting to ask Old Grand Master anything about the case itself.’

She pauses, her cheeks become flushed, having obviously slipped up. She recovers quickly, with a candid smile: ‘Well, needless to say, almost half of the proprietors on Anxi Road have been in “The Temple” before.’ Saying the secret gang language for ‘prison’ does not make her pause again, but it’s enough to cause her cheeks to flush even more deeply. Then she adopts a more resolute look, evidently throwing caution to the wind.

‘After being released from The Temple, Old Grand Master couldn’t find a job; therefore, he started his business. He went to jail because of fraud, all attributable to that mouth of his! He lied to people, saying he was an oversea Chinese who owned a rubber plantation in Southeast Asia, and had come to Shanghai looking for a bride.

‘He told people that the Chinese in Southeast Asia were mostly of Fujian heritage; therefore, they were not good looking people. They tended to be short, thin, dark-skinned, and went about in that miasma of oppressive humidity peculiar to the tropics, implying lots of genetic issues. Thus, he decided to come to Shanghai to settle the important issue of his marriage. He said that Shanghai people were superior specimens of humanity. You know, the way he went on, it was as if there were no place on the earth he had not been. He said the Shanghainese were a superior race, and among them, the women were superior to the men. The moist air south of the Yangtze and the area’s abundant water made perfect conditions for nurturing the *Yin*—femininity.

‘He would say, “Have you read the novel, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*? Jia Baoyu, the male protagonist, said women were made of water, the same idea. Shanghai women are made of water.” When an area’s water and earth are

moistening, the residents' natures are in harmony. Their bone structure will be well-proportioned and skin complexion smooth. For example, speaking of facial features, Northerners are mostly of the Mongol species with flat and wide cheekbones, large cheeks, faint eyebrows, single-layer eyelids, flat noses, shapeless mouths, and dull facial expressions. Southerners are mostly of the Hundred Yue species, just like the Fujian-type mentioned earlier, with big round eyes, double-fold eyelids, but much too deeply sucked into their eye sockets, nostrils flaring upward—a somewhat monkey-like look, not terribly aristocratic by nature. People from south of the Yangtze, however, harmonize the best features of both north and south, and furthermore, Shanghai people harmonize the best features of that region. The Shanghai harmony is not only a result of a harmonizing nature, that of the earth and water, but also a result of a harmonizing industry. Have you ever seen an old Shanghai calendar poster? Beautiful women in cheongsams and western-style fur coats, wearing embroidered shoes with high heels, sitting on western-style armchairs next to an end table full of ornate carvings. On top of the end table there is a gramophone with its horn tilted upward, a tree-branch-shaped standing lamp with a mother-of-pearl inlay shade, the visual testimony of a harmonization industry.

‘Old Grand Master wore a suit, and carried a briefcase. He sat in the bars of hotel lobbies, preaching to one group after another of the guests. By meal time, he would naturally be invited by somebody to the restaurant, where plenty of dishes were delivered to the table: sautéed crystal shrimp, crispy fried mandarin fish, beggar’s chicken, and other delicacies. By this time, he would switch to food talk. His audiences were mostly young girls of around twenty years old, and made up a cycle like a chicken leading to eggs and then eggs leading to more chickens. Some of them were even from respectable families; they were said to include daughters of high-level government officials and medical doctors, along with university students, teachers, plus a movie actress.

‘No later than a month after getting acquainted, he would ask to borrow money from these people. The truth was people were more than happy to hand over money to him, without him even asking. They would say to him: “It’s so inconvenient for you to change foreign currency at the Bank of China with the long queues and the various forms to fill out. If you need RMB, just use mine for now! Don’t stand on ceremony.” Thus he robbed Peter to pay Paul, just like a bank smoothly circulating the money in an airtight scheme.



‘Old Grand Master is pretty ugly, I mean, not bad-looking but strange-looking. At first glance, his face appears chinless, but on looking carefully, one can find his chin, except it seems as if it were joined to his Adam’s apple, thus there seems to be only one bump there. Looking again, one notices he seems to be without shoulders, but he certainly has them, plus they are very wide. Because his neck is very fat and his shoulder muscles overly strong, his shoulders sink downward, turning into so-called “ox shoulders”. Looking yet again, he seems to have an extra joint in his elbow. This is because when his palms are turned inwards and his elbows outwards, if he flips his palms out, his elbows turn in, making an effect of seemingly having an extra joint in his elbows. It’s fair to say Old Grand Master had a hard-up look, but his hands and feet compensate a little bit for that. Both his hands and feet are small, incompatibly small compared to his height of 1.78 metres.<sup>3</sup> This is another strange thing. Such a strange-looking person with such an odd body shape relied entirely on his tongue to attract his erotic targets.’

She giggles when she mentions this, perhaps realizing it is out of line with Old Grand Master’s image. Her giggle contains a little bit of sarcasm along with a subtle sense of pity. The red on her cheeks does not go away but spreads out more evenly, making her plain complexion more attractive.

‘Then one day, somebody introduced a young girl to him. Accompanying her was a circle of family and friends, who came to check things out. One of them grew suspicious because Old Grand Master somehow looked familiar, resembling a salesman colleague of his at the District Food Service Company. He wasn’t so sure about that, so the next day he brought another colleague with him. That colleague was even able to call out Old Grand Master’s name. So he was reported to the Public Security Bureau. Going through the “chicken and egg cycle” again, one person after another, those swindled ultimately added up to twelve victims—a whole dozen in total. Old Grand Master did not deny anything, and confessed all. He said that it was all his fault, and he would take full responsibility. He held that if he were smart enough he would not have blown it and since he did screw it up, he won’t try to deny it. One’s cleverness shouldn’t be used to shift blame.

‘His case handler from the PSB was quite impressed by Old Grand Master. Whenever he got sleepy during his night shift, he would call Old Grand Master

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<sup>3</sup> In old days smaller hands and feet were superstitiously perceived as fortunate because they presumably signified the person would have a more leisurely life ahead, while large hands and feet were associated with manual labour.

out and listen to whatever he had to say while each savoured a bowl of pork chop noodles as a late night snack. Because he had such a good attitude, Old Grand Master got a light sentence—three years of labour camp education. At Baimaoling Farm, the labour camp, the inmates also found him quite impressive; Old Grand Master got the position as the Team Chief. The labour camp also had a class hierarchy, and within that system, fraud was the first-class, because of the criminals' high IQ! And even among the best con men, Old Grand Master was at the pinnacle.'

A customer, a woman, who wants a hair wash and set, walks into the shop. She wants the job done carefully because she has a wedding banquet to attend that evening. This interrupts the narrative. One girl goes to wash the customer's hair, and the other pulls over the plastic container full of hair rolls, takes the rubber bands from the rolls and sets them aside to prepare for the hair set. The latter asks: 'What of the shaved-headed guy? How come you switched from him to Old Grand Master?'

The girl washing the hair also turns her face around, asking: 'Right, what happened to the shaved-headed guy?'

The woman smiles without answering, instead asking the proprietor for a plastic disposable cup. She goes to the distilled water cooler to fill her cup, then drinks slowly. People do not dare hurry her, waiting patiently. The disturbance in the shop calms down, order is re-established. The peaceful atmosphere of telling and listening has returned.

'Old Grand Master served two years and a half at Baimaoling Farm; the remaining half year was waived.' She continues, following the storyline of Old Grand Master.

'After coming back from Baimaoling, he rented a retail space on Anxi Road to sell clothes, specializing in women's apparel. He was not that attuned to business culture, which in fact shows his social savvy. He often said: "We are all on the same boat, so why bother beating others to get ahead?" Those businessmen running a tight ship on Anxi Road grew steadily, and some sublet their retail spaces to others, some migrated to upscale Hongqiao Road to open clothing stores, while some opened factories to manufacture garments. Some even went as far as South Africa and Argentina to do business. But Old Grand Master, staying put, felt content like a man holding his spot for fishing on the riverbank. He had a saying: "One can possess thousands of houses, but ultimately only three square yards are

needed each day when lying down to sleep.” So he was rather magnanimous in his business dealings. If we girls happened to like some of his newly arrived clothes, he would generously give them away for free: “Take it!” He would say. He was very nice and generous to us young girls. He also taught us lots of things. He would often say that women only need to have regular features, and as long as there are no big flaws, it’ll be fine. The important thing is to have a brain, namely, a high IQ. The old saying, “a pretty face goes with a bitter fate”, means a good-looking face does not necessarily guarantee a good life, does it? Another proverb says: “Clever face but stupid insides”. What does it mean? Why are face and insides taken as opposites? The reason is that once a woman is confident of her own pretty face, she ignores refining her brain. As a result, the previously mentioned phrase, “a pretty face goes with a bitter fate”, kicks in.

‘The four legendary Chinese beauties were in fact not that pretty. Do you know Yang Guifei? She was the Emperor’s concubine in the Tang dynasty and the emperor fell for her so hard that he almost lost his realm. Later his generals and soldiers demanded that Yang Guifei be killed before they were willing to fight any battles for him and help return him to his court. Yang Guifei had body odour, so she wore a garland of fresh flowers on her neck. In the phrase “Moon hiding and flowers shy”, the “moon hiding” part can be traced back to this. This tells you Yang Guifei did not gain the Emperor’s favour simply by having pretty looks. Then what was her trump card? Go figure it out yourself.

‘Now look at Wang Zhaojun. How beautiful could she have been? Would the emperor really have sent a beautiful consort to the barbarians? No, her worth came from being regal. She was a court lady in the royal court of the great Han dynasty and this status alone was more than enough. But she was clever! They asked her to go to that place, live in tents eating mutton, endure cold weather and the icy plateau, not even knowing the language. She did not hit her head against the wall to kill herself, but actually went, earning her a place in history.

‘The other two beauties, Xishi and Diaochan, had even higher IQs. They were in actual fact spies, used as bait. Think about it. Could they handle such a task without having extraordinary IQs?

‘The flip side is when a woman is smart she’s naturally beautiful. This type of beauty is different from being pretty, it is a graceful aura.’ When she said the phrase ‘graceful aura’ she smiled again without realizing it, but this time she did not slow down her narrative.

‘For example, Xishi was a country girl selected from the countryside of Zhujia township. Why wasn’t she directly presented to Fuchai, the King of Wu? Rather she was assigned to Grand Master Fan Li for special training. Training for what? Well, everything: walking, raising her arms, speaking, her way of looking at people. What does one rely on to learn all these? IQ!

It’s fair to say a person’s walking style determines his or her bearing. People often talk about the “rate-of-ability-to-turn-heads”. Where does this ratio come from? Well, the streets are full of people and everyone passes by everyone else in a hurry. Who has the time to examine carefully the details of anybody’s features: face, skin, body shape, and so forth? The sole factor that attracts people to turn around is the style of walking. In the old days, at aristocratic schools, such as the McTyeire School, one course in the curriculum was to teach the girls how to walk. With a book sitting on top of their heads, the girls had to walk straight, turn, walk upstairs and down, all without allowing the book to fall off. What exactly was this training for? Straighten your chest but don’t overdo it, otherwise you would look like a soldier doing drills; raise your head but don’t overdo that either, because it could become a “forehead facing the ceiling” posture; the standard is to just look straight ahead. Straightening the chest helps keep the waist, back, and neck straight. One’s footsteps can’t be too small, otherwise it would look like the stage-walk in Chinese opera, appearing unnatural and pompous. They also can’t be too big, because that would be too masculine. Have you noticed the women’s cheongsams in old movies? The skirts had openings to just below the knees. That’s right, the length of the opening is proper for the correct stride, to use all of it without stretching the fabric. Nowadays the new style cheongsams have openings all the way to thighs. That’s really tacky: The openings are so high that one can go jogging.

‘When business was slow, Old Grand Master would teach us how to walk. No kidding, when I walk on the street, with just one glance I can quickly identify those who were taught by him. Among us, a few were very close with Old Grand Master and one did not need any guess-work to figure out the unusual relationship between them. But everyone understood the relationship would go nowhere, because these women either had families or boyfriends or they were simply fooling around with him and had zero intention of marrying him. Old Grand Master, being rather old, about forty plus at the time, had no intention to get serious either. He claimed being together was all for fun, not for vexation. He even reminded us

not to fool around with young boys, because if they fell seriously in love it would cause a lot of trouble.'

The customer in the shop has had her hair set, and is in the process of having it dried. She is flipping the pages of a fashion magazine. God knows when the issue was published, its pages have all curled up. The proprietor and his hired girls are taking a break. The sunshine has moved to this side, penetrating the decoratively perforated nylon curtain, and falling on the storyteller's back. Her face is in shadow. This is due merely to the contrast, however, and the shadow under the fierce brightness is still bright, even seems soft and warm. She smiles once more, crushing the empty plastic cup in her hand. This gesture signifies the end, yet, there is more to follow:

'You'd never guess, but Old Grand Master is my husband. In fact, I was not one of those who was very close to him, but I was the one wanting to marry him. That's why Old Grand Master said I was smarter than the rest. He had said similar things before, but referring to my graceful aura: I am after all a girl from Huaihai Road.' She smiles, shy but pleased with herself at the same time, and gets up to go.

'Wait, what about the shaved-headed guy?' The two girls rush after her to ask.

'Dead!' She answers as she pushes the door open. She lets go and the door bounces back after her, shaking the yellowish sunlight on the door onto the two girls' disappointed faces.

Soon after, the girls start a lively discussion of her age. How old is she really? She appears to be twenty-something, but after combing through the timeline, she has to be at least north of thirty no matter how one does the math. Suddenly out of the blue, one word gets spit out of the proprietor's mouth: 'Whore!' This is the only sound he has made so far. His voice, pitch, tone, and expression are extremely harsh, and the girls' clamorous chattering abruptly shuts down. Silence follows.

Shanghai, 14 February 2003