

小思：雜文兩則

## Two Prose Pieces

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### Treasures

#### 獲寶

I've never forgotten what the late Mr Leung said to me: "Even rubbish dumps are worth taking a good look at. If you don't you may miss some real treasure."

Every day, on my way home, I walk past a rubbish collection point. In the afternoons the place is piled high with things which families nearby have discarded. You really can't call them rubbish—furniture, electrical appliances, planks, whole cartons of kitchen tiles . . . all in very good condition. I often see people picking out what they want and taking the things away in their cars.

One evening it looked as if it was going to rain, and I was hurrying home when I saw some cartons lying around on the pavement. The rubbish collection point was crammed with broken cupboards, so cartons were relegated to the pavement—that's a common enough sight. Cartons? They're something I'm particularly 'alert' to, for they're useful for storing books. I opened one at random.

Wow! Was I dreaming? I had always fantasized that one day I'd discover the letters and photographs of famous people, or out-of-print editions, in a rubbish dump. Maybe I really believed in the stories about 'the rag-and-bone man striking it rich'.

Wow! Books! It was all books! The first one that caught my eye was something I had been looking for for ten years, something which money could not buy: the

April 1940 first edition of Wang Yun's *The Black Knight-errant* in two volumes. I dug out another book: it was the 1946 Hong Kong first edition of Sa Kongliao's *A Diary of Occupied Hong Kong*. My heart missed a beat, my hands were shaking, and I dared not explore any further. I looked around to make sure that no one was nearby, and then hurried to telephone Ah Wai at home. I asked her to bring some big plastic bags and a handcart immediately.

Please, don't let it rain! And don't let anyone knowledgeable come this way! What can be in the other cartons, I wonder?—The things that went through my mind as I looked at those cartons seem quite ridiculous now. I suppose I felt no different from someone who had discovered a treasure trove.

I only had to wait for a short time, but it seemed forever. Fortunately, Ah Wai was there in a few minutes. She helped me open one carton after another. Wow! The dirt! It looked as though no one had touched them for decades. But that's precisely what a treasure trove is about. Wow! Wow! The books were dirty all right, but that didn't bother me. I snatched up all the Chinese books which were still in tolerably good shape and piled them on the handcart.

We pushed home a whole cart-load of books. As soon as we reached home, it started pouring. \*



Furniture, electrical appliances, planks—  
a typical rubbish collection point.  
Photograph by the editors.

## A History in Books

### 書緣

This is a family history in books!

I spent a whole day cleaning one by one the books which belonged to this family. As I handled the books, some of which I knew extremely well and some I didn't know at all, I could almost see this family's historical profile—it was a very unusual experience for me.

This family had arrived in Hong Kong way back during the Anti-Japanese War. They had brought with them the novels popular in the Shanghai of the twenties and thirties. These books had all been published in Shanghai and had been best sellers. Some of the titles, such as the romances of the Butterfly School, I recognized; others were unknown to me. Then how did I know they had been popular? From the fact that they had been through many printings. Nor did this family limit itself to popular fiction; there were also Chinese translations of Western classics as well as of lesser known works. It seems that they were a modern family—they did not read books in classical Chinese.

By the early fifties, the children of this family went to primary school—a typical Hong Kong kind of school. In the mid-fifties to early sixties these children were of secondary-school age, and they were conscientious students; they had a good number of Chinese reference books. They probably bought the loose-leafed *Selection of Chinese Literature* published by United Press to prepare for the School Certificate Exam—it was the most sought-after reference book for secondary-school students. The grown-ups in the family had remained loyal to leisure reading. They had bought Jin Yong's martial arts fiction such as *The Book & the Sword*, *The Blood-stained Sword*, and *The Legendary Vulture and the Chivalrous Couple*, all published in instalments, with flimsy covers. At the same time they had not forgotten their Shanghai days. They read the works of Hu Hanzhu, Xiao Yun'an and Huanzhu Louzhu in *Fiction Monthly*—Hong Kong works written along the lines of the Butterfly School. The younger children read *Children's Paradise* and Hong Kong versions of famous fairy tales, and the older ones read the books in the *Chinese Students' Weekly Series*. In this way, two or three generations in the family passed their days here in Hong Kong.

Whether in mainland China or Hong Kong, these books were stored in cartons once they had been read; they seemed to have been asleep for all these decades. And then when their owners decided to leave them at the rubbish collection point, a total stranger opened the cartons to find in them the story of a family. When the books saw the light of day again they recounted without omission the history of the

last few decades.

The books' owners were probably preparing for another migration and decided not to take decades' worth of books with them. But the books had something to say, and chose me for an audience.

Those long years are now history. Their family name is Mak.

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