

## A Brief Foreword to the English Edition of *Ordinary Days*

Twenty years after we wrote this little book, our friend John Minford edited this English translation and included it as one of the series of six books of Hong Kong Literature Series to be published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press. It is both a surprising gift and a singular honour. Our memoir was originally intended as a personal record of the first years of our life together. Esther gave it the unpretentious title of *Ordinary Days*, with the clear implication that after the rather extraordinary chain of events that led to our marriage, we just wanted to lead a normal life as a married couple, a life of small daily pleasures and happy routines.

When we first thought of putting these pieces together, we intended it to be a private memoir, something to share with friends. It was Pai Hsien-yung who first encouraged us to publish it as a book. John rightfully calls it a work of sentiment in the form of a series of 'casual jottings'—a modern manifestation of a long tradition of *biji* in Chinese literature. With this English translation, it reaches out to the wider world of non-Chinese readers, who are largely unfamiliar with this tradition. Our text has taken on a new life of its own—an 'afterlife', sustained by the power of the English language.

I could never have imagined that a translation, an 'act of friendship' such as this, could possess such magic. To John Minford, who made all this possible, our gratitude is beyond words. Esther and I feel

truly blessed, for John is no ordinary translator. As editor he has not only gone over every sentence, but also seen fit to grace our little book with a free sprinkling of inspired commentaries drawn from the rich repository of classical Chinese literature. Thus this English translation offers our new readers so much more than the Chinese original.

It has been my good fortune to have John as a dear friend who knows my heart (what the Chinese call a *zhiyin*, a ‘knower of the sound’). He has witnessed my continuous struggle to liberate myself from the confines of academia. I would also like to thank sincerely the two gifted young translators, Carol Ong and Annie Ren, who must have spent so many countless hours working on the draft of the translation.

For Esther and myself, this English version of our memoir, which appears on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our marriage, once again bears testimony to the emotional truth of our life together even in these increasingly trying times.

*Leo Ou-fan Lee*

12 May 2020

## Editor's Introduction

I first met Leo Lee in the summer of 1986, at a somewhat surreal conference on contemporary Chinese literature, held in a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Bavarian castle called Schloss Reisenburg. I still remember the diplomatic way in which he chaired the concluding session, discreetly signalling to me to remove from the room the long-haired young poet I had brought with me from China. The poet was dangerously close to locking horns with C. T. Hsia, presiding elder statesman of the event. Most of the people attending the conference were older than me, and had established reputations. I was young and impressionable. It was my first conference.

There was an interval of 25 years before I next encountered Leo. We were both attached to the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and he was by then married to Esther. Between the first and this second encounter, nearly all the events described in *Ordinary Days* had taken place. Leo was a completely different person. My first impression was that he seemed a great deal younger.

In the summer of 2011, our mutual friend, the poet Leung Ping-kwan, organised a symposium at the Hong Kong Central Library, on the theme of 'Translating Hong Kong Literature'. Leo was invited to act as discussant for my talk, a very informal one in praise of

'translation's highest and truest aspiration: friendship'. That evening most of us, including Leo, adjourned to the Lok Cha Teahouse for a poetry reading. When I look back on that day now, I can see a strange 'shared fate,' or *yuanfen*, at work! The six-book Hong Kong Literature project, of which *Ordinary Days* is a part, was conceived at that symposium.

Over the next two years in Hong Kong I got to know Leo and Esther much better. Esther tried (unsuccessfully) to convert me to her arm-swinging 'yoga'! They came to musical evenings in our apartment. Leo and I once did a full-length I Ching reading. Gradually I came to see him not just as a kindred spirit, but as an inspiring example of someone who had succeeded in liberating himself relatively late in life from the sterile career of a mainstream academic, and had evolved into a new realm, that of a creative and free individual, as interested in the arts of film and music as he was in things intellectual. He was his own man.

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### Learning

*Long years ago, at fifteen, maybe less,  
How earnestly I loved the Classics then.  
Poor as I was, my heart possessed true wealth,  
That ache to learn such truths as make good men.  
I threw all windows wide upon the world  
And climbed high hills to find those truths I sought.  
The heights were knobbed with grave-mounds.  
Hundreds and hundreds  
Of hundreds and hundreds*

*All brought down to nought.  
Thousands of thousands of thousands of years from now,  
What will a good name count for? Nothing at all.  
At last I understand earth's oldest wisdom  
And laugh out loud at that lad who was learning's thrall.*

—Ruan Ji (210–263)

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There was something about him that reminded me of the Hermann Hesse novels I had read in my younger days, with their recurring theme of spiritual self-realisation. We also shared a love of the music of Mahler and Richard Strauss. (Leo's essay 'A Conversation with Mahler in Paradise' is included in our companion volume of Hong Kong essays, *The Best China*.) Needless to say I was drawn to him.

There is an excellent illustrated children's book by Robert Kraus and Jose Aruego, called *Leo the Late Bloomer*, which tells the story of a tiger cub called Leo who worries his parents to death by not 'doing properly' any of the things that young cubs are supposed to do (reading, writing, drawing, eating neatly, speaking clearly, etc.). Eventually, left to his own devices, in his own good time, he 'blooms' . . . After I left Hong Kong in 2013, I sent Leo a copy of the book.

Five years later, in February 2018, he and Esther came to New Zealand to join a group of friends in an informal, week-long symposium. It was held in one of the country's most delightful country houses, Longwood, an hour's drive from the capital Wellington. That symposium, entitled 'Dreaming of the Manchus', brought together younger scholars and older more established sinologists, along with an assembly of distinguished 'cultural practitioners', opera-artists, musicians, an Italian filmmaker, a New York photographer, an

Australian stone-carver and one of Taiwan's leading collectors and art connoisseurs. It was quite consciously subverting the 'normal' model of the argumentative self-promoting academic conference (like the one at Schloss Reisenburg back in 1986). Instead we enjoyed a series of relaxed conversations and soirées, on a wide variety of literature-related topics, in a convivial setting, accompanied by good food and wine. The first afternoon's excursion around Longwood Park, 'Wandering in the Garden, Waking from the Dream', culminated in an open-air performance of a scene from *Peony Pavilion*, followed by a recital on the seven-stringed *qin* from one of the mansion's side terraces, then by Chinese-themed cocktails in the loggia, leading finally to an indoor recreation of a singsong-house entertainment.

Annie Ren, with the entrepreneurial skills of a latter-day Wang Xifeng, helped to organise the logistics of this symposium, and she had the bright idea of translating and printing an extract from Pai Hsien-yung's Preface to *Ordinary Days* as an Occasional Paper, and presenting it to Leo and Esther on the opening day of the symposium. In this way we could herald their presence as our 'guests of honour', and welcome them both to our gathering. The present complete translation of the memoir has grown from that small beginning. Carol Ong, the other translator, also travelled from Melbourne University to take part in the symposium.

*Ordinary Days* is a brave book. It lays bare in a most unusual way the heart and soul of a charming and highly cultivated Chinese couple. It charts the love story of two individuals who are no longer young, and it also boldly breaks the taboo surrounding the twin topics of depression and suicide. It is both truthful and powerful. Inevitably some readers will find this challenging. I find it deeply moving.

It has been an enormously engaging and rewarding experience for the three of us to work together on this book over the past year, mostly here in New Zealand. As editor of the translation, I have ended up taking certain liberties with the format. The memoir was originally written for a well-informed Chinese readership, and it has been necessary to add quite a few footnotes to the translation, providing simple information about people and books for non-Chinese readers. But on top of this, during the final stage of editing, I felt the need to add an informal commentary of my own, largely drawn from a variety of Chinese sources. This was done very much in the spirit of the traditional Chinese commentaries, like the Red Inkstone commentary on *The Story of the Stone*. These passages all of which are translated by myself, are set in smaller type, and separated from the translated text itself with the symbol ❖.

For anyone reading this modern memoir in its original Chinese, there are constant echoes, hovering in the background, of the long-established classical Chinese lineage of the *biji*, the ‘casual jottings’ in which just about all Chinese writers of the past indulged throughout their lives.<sup>1</sup> The *biji*-like mix of elements in *Ordinary Days* includes personal letters, journal entries, a miniature treatise (Esther’s ‘The Tao of Life and Health’), interpretive asides on a range of topics from music and art to literature, and delicate (often humorous) sketches of individuals who interacted with Leo and Esther in their lives. It calls

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<sup>1</sup> Leo’s friend, the poet and critic Wai-lim Yip, describes these echoes in the Chinese reading experience, coming ‘from the distance, trembling, ready to speak to us . . .’, as a ‘huge symphony playing inaudibly to our inner ear, converging into a confluent, dense music.’ See his *Illusion of Distances* (1993), Chapter 5, ‘Secret Echoes and Complementary Correspondences’.

to mind such wonderful classics as the fifth-century *A New Account of the Tales of the World*, and the rich cluster of memoirs written in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as *Quiet Dream Shadows*, *Reminiscences of Plum Blossom Convent* and *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*. *Dream Shadows in the Garden of Winding Paths* is a modern imitation of this tradition. One could perhaps call this lineage the Chinese ‘literature of sentiment’, and in that sense one should surely add to it the lyric verse of the Song dynasty (which Esther is especially fond of) and the novel *The Story of the Stone*, which Leo taught at Chicago and which quite explicitly sets out to be a ‘treatise on love (*qing*)’. By interspersing a certain number of loosely related quotations from such works, I have hoped to add a little of this flavour.

This has been for the three of us a true labour of love. We have wanted above all to be faithful to our friends, Leo and Esther, since in the end ‘translation’s highest and truest aspiration *is* friendship’. A little of Esther’s advice on ‘opening the heart’ (and Leo’s response to that advice) spilled over into our work. On many occasions we too felt the need to ‘open our hearts’ to the challenge of translation, staring pensively out of the window of our working studio at Three Dog Hall, in order to join them in their often passionate quest.

In presenting this work to English-speaking readers, and including it in our series, we also hope to demonstrate that, as Leo writes, Hong Kong ‘is one of the high places of the multi-cultured world.’ This memoir provides unique personal testimony to the human spirit of that world.

*John Minford*



## Preface

The story of how Leo and Esther came to be husband and wife is a long one that has taken many turns. It is also a very romantic one, a combination of two of Eileen Chang's stories, 'A Lifelong Affair' and 'Love in a Fallen City'.

In 1980 Leo was teaching at the University of Chicago. Esther was also in Chicago at that time. She was already married, and her husband Teng Man Ching was studying for a PhD at the university. Leo had himself been a student at Chicago years earlier, and they all became good friends. Esther has always been a very skilful cook, and her husband was fond of entertaining, so their home was always full of friends and visitors. Leo had spent a lot of his life on his own. Esther's fine cooking attracted him, and he was also drawn to the aura of warmth that she created around herself. He ended up a regular guest in their home over a period of more than five years. Leo is a real gentleman, and according to his own account, at that time he never once allowed himself to indulge in the slightest inappropriate thoughts about his friend's wife. Then Esther and her husband returned to Hong Kong, Leo himself got married, and for a while they all lost contact. Many years later, Leo

ran into Esther again in Hong Kong. By then her marriage had already run aground, and his own relationship had fallen apart. The two of them, after their long and fruitless search for love, suddenly found each other. Their life's dream had come true before their very eyes. It was as if Eileen Chang's 'Lifelong Affair' had suddenly become 'Love in a Fallen City'. In actual fact, the couple in Eileen Chang's 'Fallen City' are not really romantic at all. When Leo wrote a humorous sequel to this story, he portrayed the protagonist as a miserable solitary old man. And yet Leo himself had fallen wildly in love. Theirs was the true passion in the 'Fallen City' of Hong Kong.

Leo and Esther have ended up telling the strange story of this romance of theirs, in a memoir they have called *Ordinary Days*. It is very much modelled on Shen Fu's classic *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, and is also in six chapters. In his own writings over the years Leo had often referred to that early classic, expressing his admiration for Lady Yun, the beautiful and talented wife portrayed in it, the woman Lin Yutang calls 'one of the loveliest women in Chinese literature'. She must somehow have represented for Leo the ideal of the traditional Chinese woman. Esther is similar to Lady Yun in her natural wit, and in her deep consideration for others, and indeed Leo has often compared the two of them. Leo himself is deeply versed in Western literature and music, and his tastes in general have always been very Westernised. Since his youth he was always attracted to liberated modern girls, girls that resembled the celebrated lovers of the poet Xu Zhimo, Lu Xiaoman and Lin Huiyin. Lu Xiaoman was a polished social dancer, and a gifted performer of Kunqu arias, but she probably didn't have Esther's skills

in the kitchen. Leo finally saw the light and discovered that true happiness was to be found in a life of 'ordinary days', in drinking a bowl of Esther's excellent soup.

The first chapter of their book consists of the letters they exchanged when they first fell in love and while they were still living in different countries. These love letters are every bit as passionately romantic as the poet Xu Zhimo's letters to Lu Xiaoman. The young have a preconception that middle-aged and elderly people no longer experience—indeed, no longer need—romantic love. This is a typical misapprehension of youth. When Leo fell in love with Esther he was already nearly 60 years old. He thought of himself as having reached what he called 'late middle age'. I believe this is an excellent way of thinking, to protract the sorrows and joys of middle age indefinitely, and thereby to put off the premature and uncomfortable arrival of old age. In these letters of theirs, Leo and Esther bare their hearts truthfully, transcending self and emotion and all sense of age, until all that is left is purity and truth. The later chapters record their deep love as husband and wife, his devotion to her, and their inseparable bond, in the course of which they put aside all social convention. I believe they were able to do this because they were both aware that they were no longer young and that the blessing of this shared joy had come to them after many years of hardship. In their later years they sensed the importance of treasuring every moment that was theirs, of making up for lost time in the days that remained for them. Their *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* enables us to understand their deep love for each other and all that they had endured in order to find it. They do not hesitate to reveal their innermost feelings to the world. I think the last words

of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel *The Travels of Mr Derelict* must have resonated strongly with them:

*May all human beings enter into a happy union;  
May they enjoy the fruit of previous lives.<sup>1</sup>*

These words capture Leo and Esther's own insight into life, their determination to share their own good fortune with all the world's lovers.

But Heaven often envies those who are happy. Barely half a year into their marriage, in the midst of their 'wedded bliss', Esther was suddenly plunged into the depths of a depression, which lasted more than six months. The last chapter of their memoir, entitled the 'The Sorrows of Depression', is a very detailed and moving account of how they suffered together in their struggle against this affliction.

Depression is a worldwide phenomenon. Until the present day, the medical profession has been unable to pinpoint its true causes, and has still found no effective cure for it. It is a complicated and severe illness that affects both the body and the mind. It comes and goes without warning, often resembling a form of possession, over which the patient has no control whatsoever. The pain is like something out of hell. In extreme cases, it can lead to self-destruction. Esther

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<sup>1</sup> This novel by Liu Tieyun (1857–1909), written in the last years of the Manchu dynasty, was translated by Harold Shadick in 1952 as *The Travels of Lao Ts'an*.

faced the pain with great courage. She has recorded in minute detail the onset of her depression, describing the ways in which she fought it, the means she employed and the medications that she used. In a spirit of true Buddhist compassion, she hopes that others suffering from this illness can benefit from her experience. Her depression was a severe one, erupting four times over the course of ten years. When it was at its most intense, she attempted to kill herself four times within a single year. Thankfully she survived. Relying on her own will power and courage, she was able to overcome the malignant force of her affliction. On one occasion at Harvard, she had a very severe episode, and was taking medication and consulting a psychologist. But despite every effort, the treatment had little effect. Often she and Leo were reduced to tears. Leo himself felt an overwhelming sense of pain having to watch his beloved wife struggle in this way. And yet this ordeal that they shared formed a stronger bond than ever between the two of them. I feel this illness of Esther's had its own deeper purpose. It may have led her into a more profound relationship with Leo, and had a lasting and beneficial effect on their lives together.

That summer vacation, Leo and Esther came back to Hong Kong. Since Western medicine had proved ineffective, through the recommendations of a friend Esther went to see a Chinese doctor named Zhang. Esther must have had some sort of predestined affinity with this woman doctor. She took the prescribed herbs for a few days, and her condition suddenly improved. Subsequently, on the advice of the same doctor, she embraced the Buddhist faith. She had been a Christian before and had never had any connection with

Buddhism. But in this moment of crisis, she suddenly experienced enlightenment. 'Life is so uncertain,' she wrote. 'Relationships are so precious, we must treasure what is before us, we must take everything and everyone that comes our way, and never allow ourselves to hold on obstinately to preconceived ideas.' This was how Esther herself was able to deliver herself from the bitter sea of depression and share the fruits of her deliverance with Leo. When they were married, their friend, the scholar Yu Ying-shih, wrote a poem for them, the first two lines of which played on the words of Leo's Chinese name (Ou-fan):

*After all those years on Foreign soil (Ou),  
Finally he came home  
To pluck the flower of Buddhism (Fan).*

Yu Ying-shih is a man of great insight. He could already perceive that Leo was destined to be a disciple of Buddhism, and that this was foretold in his name Ou-fan. Human destiny is indeed unfathomable. I remember during my first year at Taiwan University, in my Chinese class, Professor Yeh Ch'ing-ping, when he called the roll and came to Leo's name said with half a smile on his face, 'You have an unusual name. It means the Buddha of Europe.' Everybody laughed at this without realising that it was destined to come true. Every evening before she falls asleep Esther now plays the cassette given her by her Chinese doctor, in which the Sanskrit words 'Namo Amitabha' are recited again and again.

The two of them listen to this as they go to sleep. At Esther's urging Leo has heard the word of the Buddha and has achieved some degree of enlightenment. Their marriage has brought them both across the River of Suffering to a Blessed Realm. And now they have their own statue of the Bodhisattva Guan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, sitting on the top shelf in their living room. 'With the protection of the Bodhisattva we have imperceptibly nurtured in our hearts an inner spirit of Buddhism.' These are Leo's own humble words in the last section of their second memoir, *Looking Out to Sea Together*.

The poems of the great Tang-dynasty poet Li Shangyin are melancholic and overwrought, in the very best Late Tang style. Take his immortal lines:

*The infinite splendour of the setting sun  
Gives way all too soon to the pall of dusk.*

We can never escape the transience of beauty. This is one of life's inevitable tragedies. And yet the same poet wrote these poignant lines:

*After the rain,  
The heavens shine on a lonely blade of grass.  
The bright skies of evening  
Are to be treasured.*

May this poem of Li Shangyin's bring Leo and Esther many blessings;  
may great happiness shine on the bright evening of their life.

Pai Hsien-yung

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Kenneth Hsien-yung Pai, born in Guangxi, China in 1937, is Taiwan's pre-eminent writer of fiction. In 1957 he entered the foreign literature department of National Taiwan University, where he studied English literature. He went abroad in 1963 to study literary theory and creative writing at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, subsequently became a professor of Chinese literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and has resided in Santa Barbara ever since. Among his most famous works are *Taipei People* (1971) and *Crystal Boys* (1983). In recent years he has published a lengthy appreciation of the novel *The Story of the Stone*.

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Eileen Chang (1920–1995) was a significant influence on Leo's writing, and occupies a major part of his 1999 book *Shanghai Modern* (Chapter 8, 'Romances in a Fallen City', pp. 267–303). She crops up throughout *Ordinary Days*, and Leo's novel, *The Confessions of Fan Liuyuan* (also published in 1999, shortly before his 'magical encounter' with Esther in Hong Kong), is a 'post-modern sequel' to Chang's best-known story 'Love in a Fallen City' (which is also the chapter title given by Leo and Esther to Chapter 4 of *Ordinary Days*). Chang is probably most widely known in the West from Ang Lee's film *Lust, Caution*, based on one of her stories.

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*Ordinary Days* is haunted throughout by two literary shades. The first, and most explicit, of the two is that of the exquisite autobiographical memoir *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, by Shen Fu (1763–1825). The incomplete manuscript of this work, written in classical Chinese, was only discovered and published in Shanghai in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only four chapters of the six have survived: ‘Wedded Bliss’, ‘The Little Pleasures of Life’, ‘Sorrow’ and ‘The Joys of Travel’. Leo Lee has himself described *Ordinary Days* as partly written in homage to *Six Chapters*. Behind the title of the original *Six Chapters of a Floating Life* lies the even longer Chinese shadow of ‘life as a dream’, which found one of its most memorable expressions in a single sentence from the Tang-dynasty poet Li Po’s short essay, ‘A Spring Night Banquet in the Garden of Peaches and Plums’:

*This floating life is like a dream—  
How much joy can it hold?*

Three of the commentators on that other delightful memoir, *Quiet Dream Shadows*, by Zhang Chao (born 1650), picked up on this theme:

*In every one of my lives I have wanted to be a mindless stone.  
I want to be a dream.  
I want to be the shadow of a dream.*

The other, more recent, ‘shade’ that hangs over *Ordinary Days* is that of the published love letters written by the poet Xu Zhimo (1897–1931) to his lover (and subsequently second wife) Lu Xiaoman (1903–1965), during their passionate and public relationship. Love was Xu’s creed: ‘I have no method other than love; no talent other than love; no ability other than love; no energy other than love.’ Prior to this, Xu had engaged in another

very public romantic affair with the beautiful and talented Lin Huiyin (1904–1955), who subsequently married the architect Liang Sicheng, son of Xu's own mentor Liang Qichao. Leo added two postscripts to the 2018 revised Chinese edition of *Ordinary Days*. In the first he reflected on his 're-reading' of *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, expressing great admiration for the book but at the same time certain reservations about Shen Fu's male chauvinist attitude. In the second postscript he 're-visited' Xu Zhimo's love letters to Lu Xiaoman, and found himself less than impressed by Xu Zhimo's adolescent outpourings.

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